

Diaries of a Baja Rookie

The first time I saw “On Any Sunday” was also the first time I ever saw any footage of Baja racing. I was excited and mesmerized at an early age by the challenges involved in racing and planning the Baja 1000. I played out the dream with my neighborhood buddies on bikes and three wheelers around construction sites as we pretended we were riding our own “little Baja” in suburban Maryland 25 years ago. I have always had a passion for racing. And as an adult, I have been able to turn that passion into reality by racing stock cars for 5 years. I enjoyed the speed and excitement of stock car racing, and developed a lasting relationship with Hooters. Last year, I decided I needed a new challenge. I wanted to circle back to my childhood dream of racing in the 3rd largest race in North America, the second largest desert race in the world, and the most demanding off-road one-day event in the world, the one and only, Baja 1000.

Planning the Race

In order to begin this new venture, I studied the race and learned that motorcycles were the most economical way to gain experience. The problem with this strategy was that I had very little motorcycle experience; however, I had ridden ATVs and had been racing cars and mountain bikes for a number of years. After a great deal of research, I found that the Honda XR650R was the bike of choice by the champions and the most popular bike being used. I went to the local dealership and found a brand new 2001 XR650R that had been sitting on the show room for years. The dealer said, ‘We just don’t sell these much in Texas.’ and hooked me up with a killer deal. I told him this was my first dirt bike and I was going to race the Baja 1000 in November with it. He just laughed at me.

I was a newbie at the track with very little time to get up to speed, so I made a real effort to meet as many experienced motorcycle racers as possible. They basically told me I was crazy and had no idea what I was getting into. I was almost embarrassed to inform these veterans that could smoke me at the track that I (with such inexperience) was racing in the largest motorcycle race in North America. I went to watch the Baja 500 in June to see my first desert race upfront and unedited. It was great seeing all the older racers with such young hearts. The Baja is a race that relies on stamina and courage—not age.

I soon discovered that this venue required a lot of planning; thus, needed more planners and riders. With this in mind, I turned to my buddies from high school—the Christ brothers – Brad and Brent. These were the same guys I had “played Baja” with 25 years earlier. Both of these guys were in great shape and have been actively riding street motorcycles and mountain bikes for many years; however, they were rookies as well. It took a little coaxing and convincing to prove I was serious. They finally came around and Brad Christ’s research became one of our most valuable resources.

I then turned to a guy I met 5 years earlier at the Skip Barber Racing School, Eric Brown. Apparently he had jumped a motorcycle from one sand dune to another for a world record of 260 ft. Footage of this record breaking jump landed him free racing lessons; which is where I met him and we became good friends. He was amazingly fast in a race

car and a very cool cat. When I called him he informed me that he had already raced Baja for 8 years straight. I knew this was the experience this team desperately needed to avoid major errors in planning.

He brought on Jonathan Durfey, a highly experienced and resourceful person, who also has been involved in Baja racing for many years. After it looked like this team was taking shape and had a chance to be ready by November, I contacted Hooters, my racing sponsor from my stockcar racing days, to let them know what we were doing. They expressed interest and confidence in our abilities in producing a professional desert racing program. Mike Herrick, the Hooters marketing manager, also expressed an interest in racing with us. As it turned out, he was a highly experienced Cat 1 Cycling racer and an experienced street motorcycle rider who turned out to be an integral member of the team.

Once we had the team in place, we opened up channels of communications via e-mail and starting pooling all of our research and experience to prepare the bike and plan the race. We developed a sophisticated and complete racing plan with all of the information organized into one place. We all compared training notes as a way to hold each other accountable for our training regiment of weights, mountain bike riding, running, and riding the motorcycle at the track.

A few weeks before the race, some of the veterans I met at the local tracks who had been skeptical (but helpful) came over to my trailer and wished me luck. They appeared to be pretty worried, but they knew I had considered their precautions and would not take the race lightly. Fortunately, I still had my trailer and race equipment from my stockcar racing days, so I just needed to add some specialty tools and spare parts. I packed everything 11 days before the race in my 30 foot trailer and drove to Ensenada Mexico for pre-racing. The trip out there was rough: I over loaded my trailer to a total of 17k lbs. and ended up having 4 flats on the road, received only 6 miles per gallon from my 454 dually truck and kept burning up sparkplug wires because the manifolds were glowing orange. Somehow we made it.

Pre-Racing

Pre-racing is a time to shake out the equipment and practice each of our sections to prepare for the race. We made camp in Ensenada as a central location where we could store our equipment, gain further course knowledge and meet other teams. Pre-racing started out great, all of the riders and support crew got along great and it appeared that everyone had properly trained for the task at hand. It was all very intimidating, but you just focus on the riding and try to learn as much as you can. The food is great and you begin to realize that the locals are very much a part to the racing venue. They look at it as a celebration and they are great hosts. They seem to love the attention their community receives, which of course is good for their economy.

When we started pre-racing I realized very quickly that the desert can eat you up. The terrain is very rugged, unpredictable, rocky, filled with prickly vegetation and tricky

corners. I almost killed myself about 5 times the first day before I realized that I needed to respect the desert more, change my riding style and slow it down. Overall the team had a few flats and a few spills, but nothing too damaging. On the third day, my confidence was rising and I began to pick up the pace. We road together all day and took a break around 3pm before completing a small 30 mile section. I took the lead and decided to gain some ground in order to get a jump on loading the bike in the van so the Christ brothers could drive down to San Felipe. I missed the turn and found myself about 50 miles from any paved road and my gas was now on reserve. I had accidentally ridden the bike over the “summit” which was this absolutely treacherous rocky section over stuff I didn’t even know a motorcycle could handle. There were cliffs, rocks the size of Volkswagens, loose softball size rocks, sand, and unforgiving terrain. When I started down the back side of the “summit”, I started to suspect that something was wrong. I thought I might be lost, but there was no stopping once I started going down the other side. I figured I should just keep going, thinking there must be a road somewhere just ahead. I rode for 10 miles through deep sand and then realized I was really lost and it was getting dark.

Since I thought we were only doing a small section, I didn’t carry any provisions, radio, matches or GPS. I was almost out of water and the temperature dropped to around 40 degrees as soon as the sun hit the horizon. I looked up to get a bearing on the North Star, but there were so many bright stars in the sky that I couldn’t figure out any of the constellations. I needed to get my bearings, so I climbed up a 1000 ft. mountain on foot and left my motorcycle in the valley. It was very disheartening when I got to the top, looked in every direction and could not spot a flicker or any glow of light. I was really lost, getting cold, and feeling pretty stupid for getting myself into this predicament. The question was, ‘Do I keep going forward and hope for a road?’ or ‘Go back to find the SCORE markings for the race course?’

I climbed down the mountain to find a bull standing next to my motorcycle in the dark, so it took a while to scare him off with a big stick and some yelling. I had my red Honda gear on and was trying to remember whether my biology teacher ever mentioned if bulls were nocturnal. I was a little worried he might decide to charge me. I got the big Thumper started which quickly scared him off. I turned it back the way I came, and realized immediately that my head light was not working. This was a pre-race bike, so not as reliable as our race bike. I was lucky that there was a full moon so I could at least see the trail somewhat. I “ate it” into some bushes, and was forced to crawl along at idle speed. I was really bummed because I knew I had to ride the bike back over the “summit” (the most difficult race section) but this time backwards, with no light, and at night. Not fun, but somehow I painfully pulled it off.

I now felt good that I was on the SCORE trail even though I was still 25 miles from any road. I was going OK until suddenly I ran out of gas. You have a new appreciation of the desert when you start walking through it at night. It becomes alive with all kinds of creepy stuff. Every bush or shrub you run into assaults you with needles, barbs and a variety of poisons. It was about 12:30 at night and I was cold, hungry, thirsty, and still no sign of any lights. Finally a light started bouncing off the horizon and it turned out to be a

very resourceful fireman from San Diego who was doing a night ride on a motorcycle. He radioed his friend, another fireman with a truck who was four wheeling 5 miles back and he came to our location. They took me back to my bike, gave me a PowerBar, water and 2 gallons of gas.

I was so happy to be going again, but still with no lights, now forced to go backwards on the course. This was very dangerous, something I learned first hand when a Trophy Truck came screaming through doing a practice run in the same ravine I was in. I was forced to pitch the bike up on the bank as I dove off into a prickly bush. He barely saw me, stopped to tell me what an idiot I was for driving on the course backwards with no light, and then screaming on. I tried to explain, but I was so cold my teeth were chattering badly. Finally at 2am I popped on a paved road near a town called Independence, but I was almost out of gas again and still had no light.

I had no choice but to bang on the door of a local taco stand to be welcomed reluctantly by a very bewildered Mexican lady, Antonia. She saw right away that I was in bad shape and invited me in. She cooked up some Quesadilla's, gave me a cup of coffee and her husband's sweat shirt. We rolled my motorcycle into the taco stand and she let me sleep there for the night. I had no money—she didn't care. At 4 am I was huddled under a mountain of Mexican blankets, but needed to discharge the coffee I had earlier. I didn't want to be disrespectful by going out in front of the stand, so I crept around back and to my surprise was almost eaten alive by 5 junkyard dogs. (Thank God nothing was bitten!). The next morning I woke up and drove to an RV parked on the side of the road that was obviously for racers. I woke them up, bummed 2 more gallons of gas and drove 50 miles back to Ensenada. To show my gratitude, I came back the next day and gave my Mexican Angel \$200. She reluctantly accepted.

Down in San Felipe things were tough as well, especially when Brad lost his brother in the desert and had to face his pregnant sister-in-law. She promptly sent him back into the desert with the stern instructions: "Do not to come back without my husband!" As luck would have it, he did find Brent and was able to avoid certain death or dismemberment. Later, Brent rescued JD who was out of fuel, and the endless cycle of saving each other from the desert's clutches continued.

The Race

Race day was much more challenging than I anticipated. The butterflies were ripping through my guts making everything stiff and hard to lift my leg over my motorcycle. We had a lucky draw, so we were starting 3rd in our class of 33 Sport Class motorcycles. There were a total of 95 motorcycles in the race and a total of 350 teams all together racing in all the other classes. The motorcycles go first, so we get there very early in the morning - before sunrise. We were all lined up and I remember looking down the line feeling 99% sure that everyone had more experience at this than me, but I was dressed for the part with a great sponsor. So I figured I would just fake it the best I could. I began to settle down once I got my motorcycle started and when Vince Bernal, one of our loyal, hardworking support crew, gave me some words of encouragement. Then I met the race promoter, Sal Fish and told him that I appreciated his efforts in keeping this awesome

race going. I did not hold in the clutch as instructed by my veteran advisors, and took off when the flag fell.

I now had to psyche myself up to complete the two largest jumps in the race, one mile off the starting line in front of 50k fans. I had to hit these jumps. They were money shots: important to our sponsor and the fans. I powered up to the jumps at about 60mph, aired it, and to my amazement about 10k flash bulbs burst in the dusky light. It actually scared me for an instant as I thought I had wrecked or something. I landed on the back wheel as planned and cheered for my first victory. I was very glad to be past that section and on to the next major obstacle, a silty, tough hill climb out of town. I was able to climb it successfully, but ate a lot of dust. At the top of the hill there was a massive crowd of locals yelling “Endela endela!”, which later I learned a good sign to slow down. The sun with the dust was straight in my eyes and I was almost completely blinded. I was able to make out that the locals had built a huge pile of soft sandy dirt in the track. So I backed off the throttle, cased the bike, and went over the handlebars in a slow clumsy crash. I rushed back, got the bike back up and luckily, she fired on the second kick. I quickly learned that the big difference between pre-racing and racing was that now there were thousands of people everywhere, unexpected booby traps and the speeds were much faster. I raced another 5 miles, following the signs that were sometimes missing at this point, the tracks of the other riders and the cross-traffic of the crowds. It was very difficult to recognize the trail with so much activity going on and all that dust.

One time, the locals turned the racing arrow right into a barbwire fence instead of left up the trail, and for a split second I almost ended our race. Finally I reached the first paved road section, which to my amazement had live traffic operating during the race. I got behind a very fast guy who just caught me and found out what it was like to go 100 mph on my motorcycle on the roads, screaming past traffic in both lanes. I was ripping through a corner, up on the tank, when another racer on a KTM passed me on the outside, I noticed his back tire was sliding sideways through the corner and then suddenly realized mine was as well. There were cliffs on every corner with almost no guardrail and I was doing exactly what I told my friends I was not going to do. Just race at 90% to be sure you get through the race was the advice I received, but I realized I was racing at 125% and learning what race speeds were really all about.

After the freeway ride, I transitioned back to a dirt road section that I had pre-raced 3 times and buzzed through it extremely quickly, only being passed once. I was cleared at the road by my teammates. It was great to see them cheering me on as I shot up the hill passing them, and almost crashed in the gravel transition. The next 5 miles was a very fast section and overcrowded with fans all over the track. At one point I was racing towards a crowd in the middle of the path. I could faintly hear someone blowing a whistle and the crowd slowly parted. I was blowing past a wall of people 3 feet on either side of me at 80 mph—very nerve racking. The other thing that was totally unexpected was that the locals bring their dogs on race day to chase the motorcycles. I would be racing and these dogs would be jumping at me so I did my best to not run them over, and had to give out a few dirt sandwiches with my XR650 rooster tail.

As the race continued I got into a groove and focused on the basics I learned from the hours at the track: complete braking before the corners, keep your elbows up, and keep the front wheel in the air on the whoops. I remember I had mapped out a few shortcuts during pre-racing and one was coming up, but someone had plopped their campsite right in the middle of my rogue trail around a small summit in the middle of nowhere. The campers were off to the right waiting for a good picture shot, when I made a snap decision to take my pre-planned short cut and basically turned their campsite into a garage sale. I glanced back to see lawn chairs flying everywhere, but was really glad I avoided this difficult rock section.

I was about half way through my run when I started looking for the Honda Pits, which became important when I noticed everyone else's pits popping up. There was so much activity that it is easy to miss your pit and I thought for sure that I missed mine. I ripped up to 3 different camp sites asking for gas until these two guys from Los Angeles squeezed a 2 gallon can into my tank. Of course, 2 miles later I drove up on Honda Pits and they topped me off. My confidence took a tumble when 10 miles later the first Pro 4 wheeler passed me, kicking up a bunch of dust. I couldn't believe how fast they were going. The next 30 miles went pretty smoothly aside from a few more booby traps planted by the locals. When I had 10 miles left, I said to myself, you need to take this in and enjoy the last 10 miles of your Baja rookie experience and remember it for ever...uh, yeah right. Right then I came up on a Sport Racer, lying on the ground in the fetal position, eyes closed. Two other racers stopped and were tending to him, so I got his race number and took the information to the next pit stop to report that this guy had gone down and desperately needed medical attention. Later I found out he broke his shoulder and they had airlifted him out.

As I passed the bike to JD at the Honda Pits, I noticed how calm and collected Eric was as he was inspecting the bike to ensure that everything was secure and JD was ready to go. JD is our youngest racer, 30, but has the knowledge of a guy who is 50. He saved us the night before the race by discovering a problem with the clutch basket and getting it back together in time for the race. I had a huge amount of confidence that he could handle a lot of riding and he was the only rider on our team that took on two sections. I knew the next 50 miles would be the toughest of the day for JD; he was going to race the "summit".

His entire section was 105 total miles and he started by cart wheeling the bike down the rocks. The course goes over a mountain range and the first part is extremely rocky. The course is covered with softball to bowling ball size boulders with an occasional two foot cliffs or drop offs. He fell climbing the summit and was trapped under the bike for a few seconds. He extricated himself quickly and was going again, but about 200 yards later the bike died. JD said, "My heart sank, I thought I had broken the bike costing us the race. It turned out to be that the fuel line had come off in the crash or my boot caught it while trying to free myself. After re-installing it I was on my way again." Later he hit some deep "silt beds". No description does silt justice. Imagine riding through two foot deep talcum powder with occasional holes that were three feet deep. At times the silt

would come over the front of the bike and land on his lap. He delivered the bike off to Brent in good shape and rested up for the next section.

My job now was to clear everyone, so Dena Florida (or loyal crew member from Houston) and I would drive anywhere that the course crossed the road to offer our riders goggles, tools, parts or any kind of assistance. Brent Christ, my best friend from high school, took the bike after JD and raced the infamous whoops section. He spent 8 months doing squats, bench and sit ups to prepare for this section. In his first race in his life of any kind, he crushed the field taking the whoops straight up the middle and staying on the gas.

Brad took the bike next and had to deal with some serious hazards coming up behind him at 100 mph. The 1st Trophy Truck startling him with an ambulance siren and then 10 more Trophy Trucks & Class 1 Buggies. He was pummeled with 5" diameter rocks each time they caught & passed him. He said he felt like he was at a playground full of kids that were picking up big stones and pelting him hard. At one point he jumped the motorcycle off-course into a large scrub-brush while trying to get the hell out of the way of a Trophy Truck following him at 65mph in a narrow grooved single lane portion of course. He was left riding slowly through a blinding cloud of dust left by a Trophy Truck, only to come to a surprising and abrupt upright stop when the motorcycle stalled as it came to rest against the trunk of a tree.

When he got going again he remembers looking over perpendicular to him at about 100' off the race course to see a helicopter pull alongside him and the pilot waving him off the course as another big name Trophy Truck approached at full speed. Eventually, the Baja Design lights lost a big nut on top and the Baja pit crew provided him with a lock nut to fix the headlamp that was pointed straight into the ground. Pulling out of Honda Pits was tricky with Trophy Trucks materializing around a blind corner at 90 mph. He also had other worries; Montezuma's Revenge had turned his stomach inside and out few days earlier and was now making a comeback. He briefly drove off course onto a dry lakebed in the middle of the night and almost hit a coyote. He missed a nighttime gravel turn, but luckily some brave spectators stepped into his path 100' later and pointed him back on course through the scrub brush, allowing him to finish the section in 3hrs. 58 min. Brad successfully raced his section, beating his pre-race time and handed the bike to Eric Brown.

Eric is our most experienced rider and had to race an all night section near Mikes Sky ranch, a difficult 180 miles. I went ahead to clear Eric deep in the race at 12 pm. When I arrived at these particular Honda pits there were hundreds of campfires everywhere and it was so confusing where the course was actually located. I went to the Honda Pit area and met some guys who had a pro-team coming up. I talked to these guys for a while and they really knew their stuff, tons of experience, very prepared and apparently were Baja guides. I picked their brains a little and made some new friends. Suddenly our rider, Eric comes ripping into the pits way ahead of schedule. He was making awesome time, refueled, he grabbed some new goggles, and off he went into the nighttime madness ahead. I remember the guy I was talking to ran over to the registration and found out their

rider was still 1.5 hours back. He came back and told me that we were really kicking ass, which was the first time I realized that we were not just trying to finish, but we were now contenders.

Eric handed the bike at 1:30am to Mike Herrick who had to complete a gnarly night section. At about 2am, during his run, he fell into a 5 ft. deep booby trap that was dug out by the locals. A bunch of kids helped him get his bike up, but one of those little rascals turned off his gas. They all laughed and talked to each other in Spanish, while Mike was pumping his brains out trying to get he bike started. He realized the problem and got going again. At 3am, Mike handed the bike to JD at the town of Uruapan. The bike was running well, in good shape for JD's second run, 80 mile ride to the finish. The morning air was cold. Some spectators decided to keep us on our toes by flooding the whole race course with water. So on top of being cold, JD was also wet. He was nearing the finish and lost his way; somehow the course markers had been removed. He flagged down a car that was kind enough to guide him back to the course.

I drove our chase vehicle back up Highway 3 to Ensenada to make it to the finish line on time to see JD finish. I was getting exhausted, driving up these windy roads, with no sleep for 24 hours. I made it to the finish line and saw Mike Herrick hanging out with his wife Laura and friends. Now it was up to JD to bring it home. I went up the registration to see what was going on with our class and found out that only two other riders had finished, so the next rider to come in was going to be a podium position. We saw the lights coming and they looked just like ours, but then realized it was a KTM, the same one that had passed me 800 miles earlier. We finished 10 minutes later for 4th place and were pleased to find out that we were 1 hour in front of 5th. The bike itself was in great shape; we even ran the same Bridgestone rear tire and Dunlop 606 front for the whole race. Amazingly, these tires were still in great shape. It felt good to go back to my local track to give my report on how we did, I think they really enjoyed hearing the stories. Those local old timers can still kick my ass on the track, but I think they have more fun doing it now that I am a veteran Baja racer.