

Sandblast

Santo Tomás, Mexico.

It's a Road Warrior regatta. Dune buggies, motorcycles and monster trucks snake across the narrow highway that leads to the San Miguel Mountains, stacking up in a mutant traffic jam. Within 30 miles are beaches the likes of which Brian Wilson never dared dream, desert siltbeds hungry enough to swallow cars whole and mountain passes without a single mile of guardrail. It's California without the capitalism, and over the next 44 hours, 207 antisocial drivers are going to tear through it, dodging everything from bandidos to burros as they move earth, rearrange rock and cut jagged grooves through God's sandlot. Between the wrecks, explosions and soap operas that end in Mexican jails, the Baja 1000 will feel like a bad season of *Nash Bridges*. But all you have to do is take a joyride through the outskirts of Ensenada with Ivan Stewart to know why these guys are here: This much chaos couldn't possibly be legal north of the border.

by Shaun Assael

If you're crazy enough to race the

Baja 1000, you'll learn what it means to eat someone's dust

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Stewart, off-road racing's main event, floors his truck past the shanty-speckled hills, letting the back wheels skid as if the dust were ice. About the time you realize he's not using two hands—which is also the time he's saying, "Sometimes it's just easier to go off a cliff than around it"—a little girl carrying a laundry bag appears at the bottom of the hill he's hurtling down. He doesn't even exhale. He just floors the brakes and his 620-horsepower truck stops like a New York taxi. The girl stands frozen and wide-eyed.

Stewart is one of three men who just might win this race. The others are Larry Ragland, a soft-spoken 55-year-old who's won it every year since 1995, and Robby Gordon, an Indy car racer who finished 15 minutes out of first place in '97. All three are driving factory-financed trophy trucks—Ragland with Chevrolet, Stewart and Gordon with Toyota. Toyota is helping Stewart's outfit pay for two planes, a scouting chopper and 20 chase trucks—each with maps to the nine pit stops and two dozen sight points where crewmen can eye his progress. He also has 130 crewmen, among them a bunch of ex-soldiers who look like they served in Adam Sandler's version of *Desert Storm*.

Stewart's operation is boutique Baja. But walk down the start line—past the stock pickups, dune buggies and VW Bugs—and you find the Sam's Clubbers who will struggle to reach all 10 checkpoints and collect the chits that prove they've finished the 1,070-mile course. One will be Dwight Lunkey. Lunkey

Eleven miles away, in a tomato field on the outskirts of a tiny farm town called San Quintín, a broad man is holding a red flag at an intersection. His name is Virgil, he's 50, and he sells beets, goats and whatever else can be scrounged up out here. Every few minutes, a dune buggy screams around the corner. Virgil, an official scorer, marks down its number. "This is our Super Bowl," he says, as a trio of young boys in dirt-caked undershirts runs after one of the buggies, inhaling the parched brown dust. "This is the only sport our people see."

Just then, a sick rumbling reaches Virgil's ear, and he sees Gordon's truck emerge from the belly of a dust cloud. It has one mangled wheel and no rear brakes, which is par for the morning from hell. The race is just three hours old, and already one of three men favored to win needs a wet towel to suck the dust from his gums. It will take an hour for him to get back on the road again. By then, Stewart will be through the mountains and flying past the virgin coastline that lies on the other side.

Mile Mark No. 125. 1:43 p.m. Thursday

Nobody lives in this part of the San Miguels. When you see thick black smoke, there's only one thing it can mean. Right now, it specifically means that Gary Mechem, the 52-year-old owner of a Phoenix trucking firm, blew out a rear tire

stuffed sheep, two generators, three putting greens, materials to build a helicopter landing pad and enough cooking gear to cater an Italian dinner for 30. By Fool standards, this isn't elaborate. One year, they trucked in 500 gallons of water and stocked a goldfish pond. Another time, a Fool naked but for a hula skirt presented Stewart his cleaned goggles on a silver tray with a fresh rose. Today, though, Stewart is in no mood for games. He blew a tire 20 miles back and gave up the lead to Ragland. Screaming into the cul-de-sac, he spends 45 seconds getting 33 gallons of gas, two rear tires and a fresh spare.

At mile mark No. 575, the chess game of chase trucks is in full swing. One of Stewart's drivers is headed for San Ignacio when a boulder in the middle of the highway causes him to lose control. In the opposite lane, a delivery van is chugging along at a friendly, Miss Daisy clip. The two drivers somehow manage to avoid a head-on, but not a screeching, brake-smoking sideswipe. The van driver, who's unhurt, is inconsolable when he sees his vehicle shorn from mirror to taillight. His boss had just handed him the keys; it's brand new. He's sure he will lose his job at the local potato chip company. "My van. My poor van. Look at what you've done," he shouts at the chase driver, who, desperate to get on with the race, shoves him into the truck and speeds him to Pit Five. There the petrified potato chip man is handed to another crewman. He's still shouting as he's chauffeured to the police station in San Ignacio.

Mile Mark No. 893 1:51 a.m. Friday

The entire town of Constitución is deserted. That's because 5,000 people are on the highway, partying with marching bands, beer stands and taco carts. Stewart is the first racer to reach them. A crowd of children seals his Toyota in its embrace. One mother holds out her baby for him to kiss it. A man in a Tecate T-shirt reaches in through the netting to touch the steering wheel.

Stewart would feel a lot happier about being lionized if the crowd wasn't making it impossible for him to reach his pit crew. He's had the lead for 350 miles, since Ragland lost his brakes and got stuck in a ditch outside San Rafael. But then Stewart's throttle started sticking. Now he has to ride the brake just to get down to turning speed. His ears are ringing because he's had a jet engine raging in them since yesterday morning. Because he can't hear himself, his words sound like mumbles. His crew strains to understand him.

The pit stop takes eight minutes, and over the next hour, as Team Stewart advances across the rocky foothills of Santa Rita, Ragland closes to within three minutes. In the pitch black, Stewart sees Ragland's headlights projecting out a mile, but here's the twist: Ragland's radio is broken and he can't see Stewart's thin red taillights. With 123 miles to go, the men are closer than burger joints in a college town, but Ragland has no idea. Stewart's crew (who don't know that Ragland has no idea how close he is) is petrified that Ragland



Follow the Cactus: Ragland and Stewart (second from left), Gordon and Lunkey made it through the 1,070 miles of mountains, beaches and desert relatively unscathed. Some of the 207 starters watched from ditches. To the locals, it was like watching the Super Bowl.

has hooks for arms and a nose grafted into a hole in his face. He got that way four years ago, when he blacked out in an off-roading accident in a California lake bed. When he regained his senses, he says, "I tried to get my harness off, but I couldn't feel my arms when I reached for it. They were on fire. So was my helmet. My goggles were burning back into my head." Baja is Lourdes for Lunkey. Maybe only someone with a fake nose can be jaunty about saying, "Hey, any time you go into battle, you have to have a few casualties."

Mile Mark No. 1. 9:05 a.m. Thursday

Stewart is first off the start line, gunning his V-8 and sending dust plumes skyward. In 15 minutes, as others follow, the mountain is shrouded in pockets of dust rising like steam, as if it were on fire. Robby Gordon is left alone at the mouth of the mountain, silently fuming. His truck didn't get into town until a few hours ago, and the electrical system shorted out at the start line. The monster truck has a Viper-style hood that looks like melting candle wax, and a touch-click transmission that turns shifting into a game for PlayStation. When he finally departs Santo Tomás—half an hour late—he discovers his short has fried the air compressor that powers the shifter; 20 clicks into the race, three miles up the mountain overlooking the shore, he's frozen in fourth gear. This is not a good thing; it sends him on a nerve-jangling ride over jagged rock, unable to slow to below 15 mph without stalling. When a dune buggy in front of him takes a jackknife turn from the beach, Gordon locks his brakes to avoid plowing into it, and spins into a two-foot burn. With no reverse, he's stuck waiting for a bunch of farmers to push him out.

coming around a cliff and sent his Ford catapulting down a gully. In the midst of the free fall, transmission fluid started leaking all over the 1,500-degree exhaust headers, igniting a searing fire in the cab. After the truck has stopped rolling, its driver is left hanging upside down in his six-point harness.

Astoundingly, the crash has occurred at the only spot in the entire cactus-covered range where there's help—at the location where SCORE International, the race organizer, has a radio tower. A volunteer, Victor Rajel, a phone worker from San Diego who has spent five hours getting to his station here, leads a handful of rescuers with fire extinguishers into the ravine. They pull the driver to safety and start inching up the rocks. That's when the Ford fireballs 40 feet into the sky, nearly blowing them off their feet. Rajel lets out a long, slow whistle. "That was damn close," he says.

Mile Mark No. 466. 5:00 p.m. Thursday

Dark is falling and Stewart is racing along the coastline, 70 miles from the nearest paved road. A chunk of cactus is sticking out of his thigh from where his Toyota weed-whacked a forest of saguaro. This is way past the kind of nowhere that you can buy with a credit card. This is petrified-bone-and-vulture nowhere. Yet as Stewart comes down a corkscrew ridge, flashlights guide him into something most amazing—a suburban cul-de-sac decorated with potted palms, painted rocks and pink flamingos. Welcome to Pit Four, home of the Baja Fools.

The Fools are a group of ex-soldiers and racers who, like most of the 2,000 pit workers, are volunteers. Their 12 trucks have carted enough stuff to supply a touring company for *Gilligan's Island*: a thatched-roof hut, potted palms,

Mile mark No. 600. 3:00 a.m. Friday

Dwight Lunkey is in the fourth circle of hell. He blew through San Ignacio at 2:30 a.m. Now he and his co-driver are trying to avoid being sucked into the bottomless siltbeds. More than 30 trucks and buggies are stuck in a thick orange dust that looks like something from the dark side of the moon. Lunkey is soaking wet and miserable because his condom catheter, which racers use so they don't have to stop to urinate, fell out shortly after he left Santo Tomás. Still, he's doing better than his chase truck driver, Bill Adair. A burn survivor with no fingers, Adair is supposed to be ahead of Lunkey but has fallen behind. He's just reaching San Ignacio at 3 a.m. when he loses control of his Suburban in the glare of oncoming headlights and takes out 120 feet of guardrail, nearly careening down a 50-foot drop. San Ignacio is poor enough that the mayor, told of the decimated guardrail, orders Adair held as collateral until restitution is made. The town engineer calculates the damage at \$2,000.

Lunkey doesn't learn of any of this until nine hours later. This being Baja, anyone who can set Adair free is already gone for the weekend. He sits in jail until Monday, in a cement cell with no sink, a toilet that doesn't flush and bars on cement windows that let in gnats. They pick at his grafted skin. "The police kept telling me I wasn't under arrest. I kept asking them, 'Then how come the door's locked?'" Adair says later. "They kept saying, 'No problema.' I kept saying, 'Yes problema.'" For three days, the jailed Americano is the biggest celebrity in town. The local restaurant owner gives him free food and phone cards to call home. The cops lock him up only when no one is at the station, drive him to a campground for showers and let him watch Sergio Leone Westerns.

will leap from the dark to pass them. So they decide to try a risky piece of surgery to fix Stewart's sticking throttle. The plan hinges on beating Stewart to a lighthouse in Punta Conejo, where the beach part of the course turns inland. Running wide-open at 130 mph, the chase car pulls in with barely a minute to spare. The delay allows Ragland to close to 90 seconds, virtually dead even. But, still unaware of how close he is, the exhausted Ragland decides to lock down second place rather than risk a wreck going for a first-place finish. He eases off the throttle.

At 4 a.m., under the last blue hues of a long night, Stewart passes a sparse crowd at the finish line in La Paz, the winner by just 5:11.

Mile Mark No. 1,070. Friday Race Headquarters at the Holiday Inn, La Paz.

Dwight Lunkey staggers in, 62nd overall and wired from 32 hours without sleep and the news that his fingerless friend is under Mexican arrest. Spying a debonair-looking man with crow's-feet around his eyes, Lunkey makes a beeline toward him. It's Sal Fish, head of SCORE. Fish is out of sorts too: He missed Stewart's win. He had to be 50 miles north in Punta Conejo with his Mexican lawyer, Oscar Ramos, trying to keep a drunken rancher from shooting at an innocent pit crew. As Lunkey tells him about the plight of Adair, Fish's eyes widen.

"I'll never stop marveling at what people do," he says. "There's just something about this race. Where else can you tell a friend who's not getting paid a cent to travel 500 miles into the desert and wait for you in front of the cactus that looks like a pig? And you know what? They go. They always go."

FROM LEFT: CENTERLINE PHOTO; RICK RICKMAN (3); P. HANSON/CENTERLINE PHOTO

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF DWIGHT LUNKEY; RICK RICKMAN (3)