



## Baja 2000 Coverage

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By: [ORC STAFF](#)

Off-Road Racing

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#### **The First Lady of Desert Racing**

With her win at Baja, Bekki Freeman joined the elite "2 for 2000" Club. The Las Vegas racer locked up the class championship in 1/2-1600.

With the F truck headed for the trailer and the overall winner determined, all eyes looked at the road to the horizon and the next racer it would bring. That vehicle was Truggy, and still Ragland was nowhere in sight.

Jimmy Smith pulled the Landshark across the line in a winning time of 32:50:59, at 51.127 MPH, and looking ready to go at it again. But no sooner had the crowds converged on the Unlimited class winner, than the sound of Ragland's I-6 Vortec could be heard over the din.

Ragland and Co-driver Steve Bothwell kept the throttle pegged to the bitter end, but it wasn't enough to make up for the downtime earlier in the event. When the numbers came up, Team Vortec had locked down 2nd place with a time of 32:59:24, at 50.910 MPH.

Said Bothwell, "We were going to win it or wear it. Unfortunately, Smith and Ashley won it"

Asked about the Cabo run, Ragland replied, "It was just incredible. It was so beautiful. I'll be coming back down here on my bike to enjoy it - but a little slower this time!"

Just mere moments behind Ragland's 2nd place finish, Mark Miller brought the #2 Vortec Trailblazer home in a time of 33:05:02, at 50.766 MPH. Miller had experienced his own problems along the way, but was determined to catch teammate

Larry Ragland and back up his win at the Nevada 2000 with a second place showing in Baja. He barely missed his goal. Had the race gone on any longer, who's to say he wouldn't have achieved it?

In all, it was a fantastic race for both Vortec teams, and but for the financial maneuvering of General Motors, they'd doubtlessly be a serious threat during the 2001 season. Unfortunately, barring some minor miracle, we've likely seen the last of the unique mid-engine, I-6 Vortec trucks.

But have we seen the last of Ragland and Miller as well? Don't bet the farm on it. After all, Larry is still the proud owner of one of the greatest Trophy Trucks" of all time - "Arnold" - and finishing a career with a 2nd place isn't really Larry's style.

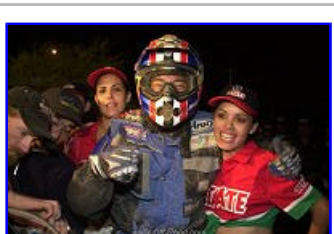
the 2nd Class 1 car across the line was the Gary Weyhrich in a time of 33:38:07, at 49.933 MPH. Weyhrich had put down Vildosola somewhere between San Ignacio and Cabo, taking over the 2nd place slot and powering onward to challenge the Terrible Herbst Motorsports "Truggy". Unfortunately time ran out with a gap of 45 min. separating the two.

Racing remained tight throughout the upper regions of Class 1 with less than 4 hours separating the top 5 finishers. On the heels of Weyhrich, Steve Sourapas posted a 34:58:28 - 48.021 split, with the "Grand Old Man of Baja" Corky McMillin, securing 4th for the SoCal clan in a time of 36:29:46 at 46.019 MPH. 5th place belonged to Gustavo Vildosola, with a time of 36:37:17, at 45.862.

### **Protruck Memories**

For a former 7s champ and veteran of the Mini-Mag wars, the 2000 SCORE season was a rough one. In race after race, Scott Steinberger and the PCI crew nibbled at the edges of Protruck victory, only to taste the bitter flavor of defeat - time and time again.

It began a promising season at the Laughlin Challenge, with Steinberger finishing a solid second, but devolved quickly after mysterious engine failures traded record pace runs for DNF's and lower than expected finishes. Ultimately, the source of the problem was tracked down, and the crew prepared for one last shot at redemption - The SCORE / Tecate Baja 2000. That's racing folks, and after years in the game, Steinberger buckled up and began the long, meticulous process of prepping the Lycos / PCI / Off-Road.com Protruck for the most punishing race in off road history.



Continuing a long standing tradition, there were many Japanese racers at the B2K. After the races many of the bikes are crated up, shipped back to Japan, and put on display as the ultimate symbol of achievement for their riders.

When the checkered flag fell in Cabo, all their hard work paid off. Scott crossed the finish line in a time of 40:33:45 with an average speed of 41.406 MPH, besting the 10 truck field, and 2nd place Rick Johnson by a full six hours. Throughout the event the Protruck class remained very competitive, with a mere 10 hours separating the top 5 finishers by race end. In the final standings, the Lycos / PCI / ORC Protruck finished 35'th overall, and 16th among 4-wheeled vehicles.

"Overall, we had a fantastic race," said Scott, "Aside from getting stuck a couple times and losing a few minutes, we were just about problem free. It was a race from the beginning. We were on the gas from the get-go. It was either that, or lose ground early on, and I didn't want to have to try and make it up later. There were too many opportunities for things to go wrong."

As the finish line drew nearer, Steinberger was passed by Curt LeDuc in the Class 8 Jeep Grand Cherokee, and Jeremy Spirkoff in the Stock Full F-350.



From across the Pacific to across the Atlantic. While a mostly stock Citroen may not be the ultimate desert racer, that didn't stop the Brits from giving it a go. Jolly good show, chaps!

"By that point, we were several hours ahead, and there was nothing to be gained by racing guys who weren't in our class. We weren't going to win the Overall, so it didn't make much sense to take the chance of breaking something and losing it all. We figured that we'd get the class win if everything held together, and that's what we had set out to do. We weren't going to risk it."

"I can't thank my crew enough," said Scott, "I'd also like to thank my sponsors Lycos, Digital Negibors.com, Joe Explorer.com, Off-Road.com, and Globalstar. If it wasn't for them, there's no way we could have had the race that we did. It was about as close to perfect as you can get."

### Heavy Metal

After passing Stienberger, Curt LeDuc took his Jeep Grand Cherokee to victory, besting the best of Class 8 with a time of 39:08:35 at 42.907 MPH. Though the desert and CORR series champ hasn't been a fixture of the desert scene throughout the 2000 season, he appears to have lost none of the skill and finesse that has put him in the winners circle so many times before.

Francisco Monroy took up the #2 spot nearly 5 hours back with a time of 43:52:21 at 38.282 MPH. Though Monroy's accomplishment was a great one, it put into perspective

LeDuc's utter dominance of the class. Back in 3rd, Baja 1000 Class 8 Champion Chris Wilson wasn't far off the mark, with a time of 45:57:51 at a 36.540 MPH average. For Wilson, the 2000 was a race run on a shoestring budget, and with a skeleton crew. Regardless, the top 3 finish is one he can take back to his ElCajon California home with pride.

### "Limited" Success

For a limited class, 1/2-1600 sure generates a lot of excitement, and attracts some of the sport's finest talent. Witness Bekki Freeman. The first lady of desert racing has spent the season hopping in and out of the #2 Vortec Trailblazer, in which she co-drove to a BITD Nevada 2000 win just a few short months ago. Now, back in her familiar white, blue and pink 1/2-1600, the fiery Miss F was well on her way to backing up that win with another chunk of 2000 gold.

Her main adversary, Kash Vessels, son of the legendary Frank "Scoop" Vessels, was in hot pursuit, and the two had been in close quarters as they traversed the peninsula. But in the end Bekki prevailed, besting Scoop Jr's 38:49:11, at 43.265 MPH with a slightly quicker 38:37:20, at 43.486 MPH.

Along with the Terrible Herbst "Truggy", and Team Hondas Johnny Capbell / Tim Stabb, Freeman became a member of the elite "2 for 2000" club, but her win at the B2K didn't stop there. Freeman secured the 1/2-1600 Championship, and narrowly lost to Troy Herbst for the overall season points title. All in all a pretty good year for the young lass.

Said Bekki, "We started with the same set of BFG tires we finished with. The race went real well. It was an easy day. The only problem we had was that our pit crew couldn't catch up to us. When I got in the car, Kash Vessels had 30 minutes on me. I caught him. He took the left line. I took the right."

Mark Bunderson - "On the way to the Bay of LA we were down 20 minutes." Then the crew took a turn for the worse, heading off the side of a cliff. "How can you do 4000 turns picture perfect and then blow turn 4001. I exited the turn and swung around way too far. I said, "son of a bitch, we're going over!" Dale Ebbert, Class 1, bailed us out as soon as he saw the pink car. He knew it was Bekki and hooked up the tow strap."

Class 5 finished off much as it began with Mike James and George Seeley battling it out over every square inch of race course. Although James won the "Battle for the B2K," winning



### I left my hood in San Felipe?

This Sportsman buggy piloted by a group of Gringos out of San Flip had a rough run to the finish. Said one crew member, "We're still talking to each other - sort of."

the event in a time of 45:42:44, with a speed of 36.741 MPH., it was Seeley who ultimately won the war, regaining his Class 5 Championship with his finish less than 10 min. behind the Outlaw car. It was just what he set out to do.



"Look, I've just driven 1700 miles through rain, rocks, cows and cactus. Trust me, I can do this"

Before the race we had the opportunity to talk with Seeley during a lull in the action on contingency row.

"Oh, we definitely are out here to win this," opined the soft-spoken racer, "But make no mistake, the important thing is to finish this and wrap up the championship. Mike's (James) always been a really tough competitor, and we think we'll come out ahead, but the finish is the important thing here. Just finishing a race like this is an incredible thing."

Stock Full racer Jeremy Spirkoff has done his own share of incredible things this season, with wins at every Baja event including the Baja 2000. Although he grew up in a desert racing family, the 2000 season was the first time Spirkoff had built and campaigned a vehicle of his own.

In the depths of the Spirit SoCal race shop Jeremy slowly built up his Ford F-350, hoping to have all the bugs worked out for the Baja 2000. He needn't have worried. From the start, Spirkoff and his F-350 have proven to be the terror of the stock full class, and it's little wonder he's up for the SCORE "Rookie of the Year" honors.

While he's had easier races in his short career, Spirkoff's B2k experience was largely trouble free.

Said Jeremy, "We had alternator problems off the line, along with a few tire changes. After that it was a smooth, clean ride to Cabo. We've won every Baja race this year in this F-350. This is one tough Ford Truck."

Spirkoff laid down a decisive win in a time of 40:01:12, at a 41.967 MPH average, leaving 2nd place to Al Hogan nearly 6 hours behind. Brothers Mark Stein and Dave Sykes pulled down the 3rd and 4th slots in their Fords, followed up by Baja legend Rod Hall of Team Hummer, who'd seemingly done the impossible; He'd broken a front spindle off the brutally rugged Hummer, losing several hours while repairs were being effected.

"I didn't think I could break it like I did," said Hall, "But I did. Overall, the Hummer worked really well out there, but today those Ford's were pretty fast."



In Stock Mini, Dr. Macree Glass faced brief competition from the Vehicross of Bob Land before the Isuzu went down for the count with parts breakage. Glass however brought an H-bomb to a knife fight, loading down his pit/chase trucks with 4 complete front and rear end assemblies, 2 spare trannies, an entire motor worth of spare engine parts, and most of the rest of the parts needed to assemble a completely separate truck.

He broke exactly 1 bolt throughout the entire event.

"We still have the original rubber bushings on there," said Glass, "And they look brand new!. After loading up all these spares, we broke 1 freaking bolt. Can you believe that? One bolt!

We had a great run all the way down the peninsula. No problems to speak of, no hassles. We just put it into gear, locked in the hubs, and hit it. Hell, even our hubs are still in perfect shape!"

As you could probably tell, the good doctor was fairly enthused with his B2k victory.

"We're just going to clean it off and go Run the BITD race in December up in Vegas. The truck is ready to go. We're hoping to see the Sheriffs (Deputy Steve Williams LASD Ford Ranger) out there. We're ready for them!"

Moving up the Mini-Truck ladder, Joe Custer dominated the field, posting a time of 43:22:51, at an average speed of 38.716 MPH. While Custer's problems over the course of the event bordered on non-existent, the same could not be said for the competition. Marco Novelo crossed the line a full 17 hrs. behind the winning truck, with 3rd place Doug Siewert over 8 hrs. back.



The "Baja Challenge" cars of Wide Open Baja overcame early problems to post a respectable finishing rate. The class bordered on a "celeberty" event, bringing some of the greatest pavement racers out to play in the desert. There's real potential here.



Walter Prince and the "Candy Cane Car" were just one of the vehicles supported by the Checkers

The two other entries in the 7s class, Eric Harden and Eduardo Gonzales fell to mechanical problems, DNF' ing the race.

Class 7 saw "Lil'Mac", the S-10 Chevy of Jeff Lewis and Team McPherson fight their way to the top of the class in what became a 2-way battle with Perry McNeil's Ford Ranger. In a class fraught with breakage and downtime,

Off-road Racing Team. The Checkers have been a staple of desert racing since it's inception, and show no signs of slowing down.

Lewis emerged victorious in a time of 50:15:25, at an average speed of 33.419 MPH.

It would be over 4 hrs. before the #702 of McNeil would enter

Cabo.

"All within a five mile stretch at San Quintin, we had one tranny swap, brakes went bad and had only one flat," said Perry. "A motorcycle wouldn't let me by. If he had a bumper, I would have hit him. The guy has balls bigger than a watermelon."

Although there was plenty of time remaining until the cut off point, McNeil's Ranger would be the last of the four starters in the class to finish. Somewhere on the course Craig Turner and Rick Taylor had each broken down, and sufficient repairs to continue were deemed impossible. It was a heartbreaker for Turner whose 2000 season has been either feast or famine since stepping up from 7s.

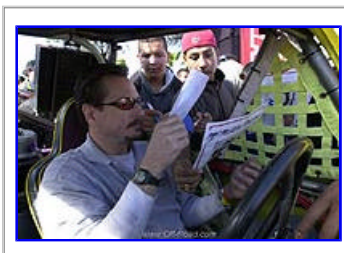
Class 10 proved to be as competitive in a marathon race like the Baja 2000 is it is on the short courses of Laughlin. Over the near 1700 mile distance, Steve Myers pulled out the win by the narrowest of margins - a time of 41:44:49, at 40.231 MPH that held off 2nd place finisher Don Hatch's 41:45:08, 40.226 MPH.

Think about that one for a minute. At the end of 1700 miles and over 41 hours of racing, a mere 19 seconds made the difference between victory and defeat.

Class 10 also boasted a 50% finishing rate, with 5 of the starting 10 entries making it to Cabo. Among them, Mark Hutchins, who earned a solid 3rd place with a time of 42:34:18, at 39.452 MPH, Dennis Hunter, who locked down 4th place in 55:47:28, at 30.104 MPH, and finally Ron Brookshire, whose 59:26:20 finish at 28.256 MPH performance wrapped up the class.

In SCORE Lites, Jim Dizney shocked the class, pulling off an upset win in his "converted" class 1/2-1600 car. The desert veteran grabbed the brass ring nearly an hour ahead of 2nd place Pat Shea with a winning time of 44:27:52, and an average speed of 37.772 MPH. Back in 3rd, class fixture Jerry Penhall was under 7 min. off a 2nd place pace, giving up a time of 45:38:59, at 36.791 MPH, to Shea's 45:26:09, at 36.965 MPH performance.

Class 3 was well represented at the B2K with a total of 8 short wheelbase vehicles pulling up to the line in Ensenada. By the time the caravan reached Cabo San Lucas, they'd lost three along the way. To put it into perspective,



there were more Class 3 finishers at the Baja 2000 then there were entries at each of the previous SCORE races throughout the season.

And as usual, Darren Skilton was their leader. Well on his way to replacing Dick Sasser as "The King of the Class 3's", Skilton drove his Kia to yet another win in a time of 49:16:39, at 34.083 MPH. On his way to Victory, Skilton's time bested that of the mighty Class 7 trucks, and came dangerously close to that of the Class 5 Unlimited VWs.

He may have lost the battle, but he won the war. George Seeley wrapped up the Class 5 Championship for the Checkers with a 2nd place finish to Mike James at the Baja 2000. One of the sport's true ambassadors, Seeley always takes time to talk with his fans.

While Skilton maintains his stranglehold on the Class 3 Championship, Darren's father Clive wasn't about to let the kid just walk away with the B2K trophy. Just to keep his son honest, the elder Skilton got together with his long-time friends in the Southern California Jeep Dealers Assoc. and built up a Grand Cherokee. No stranger to the wheel of a desert truck, Clive matched Darren mile for mile down the peninsula, pitting good old American tech against the dominant import of the class. In the end though, it was wasn't quite enough. The Grand Cherokee crossed the finish line with a time of 51:33:15, at 32.578 MPH, locking down 2nd place ahead of 3rd place Ikuo Hanawa.

Class 9 turned in an over-50% finishing rate with Bullhead City AZ's Joe Shaeble leading the pack into Cabo. Shaeble's 51:42:18, at 32.483 MPH finish came a half hour ahead of his nearest competitor, Tijuana's Bill Rodriguez, whose 52:12:46, at 32.167 MPH time garnered him a solid 2nd place slot in the count. In 3rd, 34 yr. Old Ensenada resident Eric Fisher established a solid finish; 53:53:15, at 31.167 MPH, over Hector Sarabia, whose 59:32:19, at 28.209 MPH run closed out the class.

Class 5-1600 saw 8 of 11 cars finish the B2K with Vic Orellana way out in front (relatively speaking) of a class that routinely posts razor thin margins for victory. Orellana's 46:15:07 time and 36.312 MPH average speed put the Rancho Auto Parts/Carquest/BF Goodrich sponsored VW a full 1hr. 15 min. ahead of the 2nd place Samuel Martinez entry. Posting a time of 47:58:19, Martinez raced away from his San Diego home at an average speed of 35.010 MPH down the peninsula.



Third place in the 5-1600 class went to Arturo Cervantes in a time of 49:37:42, at 33.842 MPH, while the odds on favorite and Class Champion, Dave Gasper had to settle for a hard fought 4th.

To the surprise of many, there



No, really! we went to Baja to cover the race! Honest! The girls of contingency row are another mainstay of the Baja races. Companies like Akron and Tecate go all out with displays, live music, and of course the lovely señoritas to attract row goers in to see their wares.

was indeed a Class 11 finisher in the Baja 2000, but Eric Solorzano wasn't too shocked. He'd just spent the last 69 hours, 54, minutes, and 12 seconds of his career getting the mostly stock VW to Cabo. Call it an act of will, call it an experiment in masochism. Call it anything you like. Just be sure you call it one hell of an accomplishment; Oh, and be sure to call Eric a true

Champion.

After their scare in San Ignacio, the Baja Challenge crews finished 50% of the eight-car class. Jay Culbertson was first across the line in a time of 62:34:05, at an average speed of 26.843 MPH, followed a good distance back by Kevin Doyle's 73:26:12. In 3rd, Bruce Chernoff clocked in with a time of 76:05:34, followed by Matt Auttersson whose 77:07:58 time brought the final Baja Challenge car in just under the mandated 80 hr. time limit.

Jess Soldana, Culbertson's co-driver in the BC-4 entry looked quite the worse for the wear after the winning run, but was immediately set upon by a mob of autograph seekers and one ORC reporter - Fidel Gonzales.

"Have you ever raced Baja before?" asked Fidel

(He slowly shook his head.)

"How did you like it?"

(He slowly shook his head.)

How did you like it (Louder)?

"I'm tired, and my ass is sore. I want a hotel room."

Fidel hoped the thrill of victory would set in after a hot shower.

### ATV Action

When the winning ATV crossed the line, it wasn't the Honda that many expected. It was a newcomer to the ATV scene that laid waste to the competition in the longest continuous off-road race in history.

The mud and dust couldn't hide the distinctive yellow of the Bombardier 650 piloted by multi-time Champion Dean Sundhal, and the winning rider



The effort to provide pit support for the Baja racers required armies of men and women, and thousands of parts filled vehicles. It made no difference if you were in a truck or buggy, or astride

couldn't mask his enthusiasm for the machine.

a bike or quad; No one raced the 2000 alone.

"Hey, that thing still sounds bitchen," said Sundhal as he chugged an ice-cold Tecate. "It was a long ride. I broke a swing arm pivot bolt, and I had to hold it in with my foot for about 60 miles. It was fantastic. The ride was fantastic. I was thinking about it here. This 650cc paid its dues through two back-to-back 2000s."

High praise for a new bike indeed. Greg Row and Sundhal took the yellow screamer to victory in a time of 41:34:44, at an average speed of 40.394 MPH, besting the 2nd place Honda of Gary White by just over 15 min, and the 3rd place EX400 piloted by John Gregory by considerably more.

On the other end of the finishing spectrum, Wes Miller and the all new Yamaha Raptor experienced something less than a stellar run, but the determined racers managed a finish none the less. Said Wes,

"Well, the whole frame busted in half - twice. The bike broke a lot. We rebuilt the motor in Catavina, broke the radiator in La Paz. . . We were thinking of just launching it into the water and finish the thing off. Because, it's done!"

With more R&D work the massive power of the Raptor could prove a threat to the Bombardiers and Hondas, but with so little time on the new machine, such difficulties aren't unexpected - though still unwelcome.

### Fitting Ends



Johnny Campbell takes Sal Fish for a "Victory Lap" around the finish line. As the festivities came to a close, there was already talk of another 2000 miler at some point in the future.

After the final car pulled across the line and the banners came down, Cabo San Lucas lit up with the sights and sounds of thousands of racers, crews and fans filling the restaurants, taverns and attractions of the oceanside city. You can probably imagine the scene. After months, even years of preparation, the costs and sacrifice of the people involved, and the 80 hours of competition that it all led up to, these folks were ready to party! And party they did. After putting a serious dent in the Tequila and Tecate stores of the San Luc establishments, the raucous racers slept it off in the many hotels along the coast before making the long trip back up the peninsula - and home.

"Johnny, get me outta'  
here!!!

There was a lot of history made during the Baja 2000, and even more memories. For some, it was the thrill of victory. For others, loss and sadness. Yet as "the greatest Baja that ever was" moves farther into history with each passing day, it will always remain a part of the lives it touched - no, "consumed" during it's time with us.

Perhaps, the spirit of the Baja 2000 was summed up best by another long time racer and patriarch of the sport, Jerry Herbst. Said Jerry,

"They never let it down, they never gave it up. Never!"

From us here at Off-Road.com, we'd like to extend our sincere thanks and congratulations to Sal Fish and the staff of SCORE International, and especially the racers and crews of the desert racing community. It was one hell of a race guys, and no one will ever forget it.

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