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- [Brock Yates](#)
- [Quote of the Week](#)
- [Thumbs Up/Down](#)



## RALLY/OFF ROAD

### Baja 1000 – Pete Brock's Postcard From Baja

Ensenada, Mexico, Nov. 12 — Johnny Campbell and Tim Staab, co-riding a works Honda XR650R, made it look easy, winning overall in the 34th Annual "big one" below the Mexican

border, the SCORE Tecate Baja 1000. The now-legendary Honda duo won their fifth straight SCORE desert race by finishing the rugged 667mi circuit through the deserts and mountains of Northern Baja in 13h51:40, a full 54min over the next fastest vehicle!

The bikes have a distinct advantage over the four-wheeled contingent, as they start two hours earlier for safety reasons. The extra time makes a huge difference, as the two-wheelers have little dust to contend with, plus an additional two hours of daylight, which means that the more agile bikes can often cut cross-country in sunlight instead of sticking to the normal road course the four-wheelers use.

Even so, Campbell and Staab were still 65min faster than the second-in-class works Honda back-up team of Steve Hengeveld and Jonas Street, who were delayed with fuel mixture and mechanical problems that delayed them for more than 30min. Campbell and Staab averaged 48.84mph, considerably slower than some earlier Baja 1000 averages, an indication of just how difficult the course was this year.

First overall in the four-wheeled classes was the veteran Fortin Racing Team of '97 Baja winner Doug Fortin and his new co-driver Charlie Townsley. Fortin, a specialist builder of racing transmissions from La Mesa, Calif., who has traditionally driven his Class 1



The Ford Trophy Truck of Dave Ashley and Dan Smith won its class in the Baja 1000 and the season-long SCORE class title. (Photo: SCORE International)

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Jimco single-seater solo, admitted after the race that he'd made the decision to split the driving with Townsley after pre-running this year's course several weeks before the event.



"Man, this was one of the most difficult courses I've ever driven," he said. "There was just no way I could have gone flat-out all the way by myself. I figured that I'd need someone to run the middle third, and Charlie was my first choice. He did an incredible job in keeping the car together so I could make the sprint to the finish."



Fortin had a tough first third because he had drawn the 19th starting position behind eight Trophy Trucks and 10 other Class 1 Unlimite



"The dust was really heavy in the early going. It took forever to get by that field," Fortin explained. "There were some very fast cars, but my chassis worked flawlessly. This V4 'Chevy' seemed like the perfect engine for this course, as some of the heavier cars faded when the terrain got really rough."



Fortin recalled that he had caught Robby Gordon's Trophy Truck on the long, fast, rolling, sandy section, called the "whoops," below San Felipe, where the two were running almost flat-out, side-by-side.

"Gordon looked over, surprised that anyone could match his speed and gave it all he had. He hit one bump so hard that his truck went airborne, crossing right over my nose about four feet above me!"

Gordon was able to pull away slightly on that section, but was later felled by a suspected break in his wiring harness that was initially attributed to a failing alternator.

The traditional battle between the usually lighter Class Class 1 "Unlimiteds," where there are essentially no rules, and the heavier, more powerful Trophy Trucks is becoming more blurred. The traditionally front-engined "Trophies" are slowly converting to mid-engined layouts, like Gordon's latest self-designed "Ford F150" silhouette racer and the latest mid-engined "Unlimiteds" that are now beginning to use large V8s to match the speeds of the previously faster Trophy Trucks.

This year's road course, following the approval of most racers who ran the Baja 500 earlier this year, was far more rugged than some previous 1000s, where the higher top speeds of the Trophy Trucks gave them a distinct advantage. SCORE director Sal Fish personally spends weeks in the rugged outback

of the Baja peninsula looking for challenging sections of road that will, hopefully, give all competitors an equal chance at the overall win.

"The ideal Baja course has a little of everything, so no single type of car has a distinct advantage," says Fish. "We try to find a set of roads that will even the competition."

This year's combination, though, proved especially difficult for those with heavier cars and correspondingly higher horsepower. Fortin's Jimco, for example weighed only 2200lb, with its "half a Chevy" V4 engine, making him the lightest (and fastest) of all the "Unlimiteds" in the race. A true comparison of "best" design philosophies for winning this year's 1000 was eliminated in the early stages of the race when Terrible Herbst's Racing's infamous shark-liveried "Truggie" (a 6000+ pound, Mike Smith re-designed, ex-Trophy Truck without fenders, but still using the traditional "heavier is stronger and better, and even more horsepower is even better" formula) was sidelined for almost half an hour when it collided with a boulder while trying to avoid a spectator's truck in the middle of the course near Guadalupe wash.

"We tore the whole right front suspension off....that killed our chances to win," said Troy Herbst, who was co-driving with multi-time Baja bike champ Larry Roessler.

The Herbst's "Shark," which won last year's Baja 2000 and has often been a winner in the SCORE Duralast Desert Series, is the antithesis of the usually more sophisticated Class 1 "Unlimiteds," but has still managed to confound the majority of those who believe that a lighter car, but with a similar power-to-weight ratio to the "Trophies," is the way to go. Up until now no manufacturer has been able to design a Class 1 transaxle that will withstand the torque of the higher-horsepower big V8s used in the Trophy Trucks.

Many Trophies use automatic transmissions to "cushion" the shock loads imposed when the huge monsters go airborne, but for this race Herbst Racing's Mike Smith resorted to a very sophisticated manual Wiseman gearbox for the Herbst team's No. 1 Ford-powered Trophy. The new gearbox showed incredible promise, as it improved acceleration markedly between 35-100mph, where most time is made in short spurts, but the software to make it shift perfectly hadn't yet been refined on the downshifts, causing it to fail after less than 130mi.

"It's far from perfect right now," said Smith, "but

when it's working, it's really incredible... it's just a matter of time. We'll have it right for next year."

The Herbsts' weekend wasn't an entire loss, as the "Shark's" sixth-overall finish still gave the Las Vegas based-team their fifth consecutive Class 1 SCORE championship.

The Trophy Truck class win, and the SCORE Championship for the 2001 season, was won by the rugged Duralast "Ford F150" single-seat racer designed and built by Dave Ashley and Dan Smith of Riverside, Calif.

"We set a pace and let the race come to us," said Smith at the finish line. The duo finished ninth overall in 16h45min. "There were a lot of fast trucks out there, but they'd all faded by the time we went over the summit, near Mike's Sky Ranch," added Ashley. "That was the most difficult section of the course," said Smith. "Once we were in front, it was just a matter of making it home."

Riviera Racing's Mark Post, in the ex-Robby Gordon Ford, led early on by virtue of his first starting position, but was soon overhauled on time by Gordon's new, glistening, all-black, CD2-sponsored, mid-engined Ford that seemed to fly effortlessly over even the most difficult terrain. If it had not been downed by electrical problems it might easily have contested for the overall win.

The SCORE Duralast Desert Series seems to grow each year in quality, as more than three new Trophy Trucks are now under construction for next year's series and the number of Class 1 "Unlimiteds" entered in each race seems to increase as well. A front-running Trophy can easily cost more than \$500k to build and develop, as there are few "off-the-shelf" components available for such unique creations.

The diversity of design is what makes desert racing so unique. There are few rules governing the construction of the fastest classes, so ingenuity and experience count for more than cubic dollars.

The famed Mexican "off-road" events are really off-pavement open-road races run over an ever-changing complex of unmapped roads that cover the desolate Mexican peninsula. Thousands of spectators, both American and Mexican, line the course for miles, even out into the most rugged areas where many camp out for the weekend, making the Baja races the last great open road races in the world. Two hundred twenty-six entries from more than 30 U.S. states and five countries competed in this year's 1000.

Viva Baja! — *Peter Brock (Photo: SCORE International)*

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