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COMMENTARY

Peter Brock: Speedweek in Baja

Redmond, Wash., Nov. 18
 — Back in the days when road racing was more about fun than money, the end of the racing season meant the *real* fun was just about to begin. As the winter cold shut down the formal racing season above the equator, many in the racing community would head southward to someplace in the sun where they could *really* cut loose and stand on it just for the pure hellious joy of living and going fast.



Because there were no great monetary rewards or championships at stake and the cars were either last year's best (or next year's prototypes being tested) and they'd all have to be rebuilt or sold before the new season started, everything seemed expendable. Racers and friends of racers of all stripes, who perhaps had not seen each other all season (because they'd been off competing in different series in distant parts of the world) would gather and square off on the track – and sometimes off (provided there were enough rental cars to go around).

There were several choices; some went down to catch the Australian and New Zealand summer in the famed Tasman Series, while others might contract a ride with a wealthy South American for the *Temporada* in Argentina and Brazil. Many agreed that the most fun could be had by accepting the invitation of a master promoter named Red Crise and the government of Nassau for an all-expenses-paid bash for a week in the Caribbean. Whatever the choice, you knew up front that it was going to be fun.

The old Nassau airport – with its sharp coral composite runways – was hell on tires and even worse on suspensions, as the aging tarmac and concrete slabs that defined the circuit never met equally. However, the straights were long enough to really let it all hang out and, since that was real the purpose of going there, the racing was wonderful. It was always a "run what ya brung" week and, since

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there were no tear-downs after a race, almost anything was considered legal.



After an undefeated USRRC Championship season in 1963 with his mighty Cobra team, Shelby was devastated when Roger Penske showed up with the first of the 700hp Corvette Grand Sports and smoked the vaunted Snakes by 11sec a lap! Chevrolet's payback for not being allowed to play in the SCCA's first pro series was a bitch for the Texan, but worth every penny spent by GM. It was just a glimpse of what could have been had we not had to return to the reality of rules and regulations a month later.



Those who never had a chance to run in that carefree era might mourn the loss of those Good Ol' Days. Those who know better, though, now quietly pack their gear and head for Baja.



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As it has for more than three decades, every mid-November SCORE still hosts the oldest and wildest open-road race still left on the planet. The Baja 1000, now in it's 33rd year, has been a rite of passage for literally hundreds of Southern California racers. Many, like Robby Gordon or Rick and Roger Mears, grew up racing on the Mexican dirt and later went on to fame and glory on pavement. Others, like Parnelli Jones, who had retired from professional racing, continued to run the Baja for several years after they'd hung it up for money, simply because their years of acquired skills on America's toughest dirt ovals still let them excel where talent counted for more than equipment or money.

The Baja 1000 continues to be that special gathering place in the winter sun that still draws racers of every age and discipline. Wealth helps, as it does in every form of racing, but far less than it does anywhere else, because skill and experience count for more than than dollars. In Baja it's more the course you race against rather than whom or what. Treacherous old codgers, who've spent decades learning every trick in the desert and every back road on the peninsula, continue to test and best the fastest of the young lions, who are just as certain that their reflexes and speed will deliver victory in what ever class they choose to run.

There's a class for anything and everything on wheels in Mexico. The main thing to remember is that, like a knife fight in a Mexican cantina, there are no rules in the two "unlimited" classes. The fastest two categories are the Trophy Trucks and Class 1 desert racers that are as opposed in design philosophy as Formula 1 and World Championship Rally cars.

The Trophies are mega-buck, 6000lb, one-off, silhouette racers with no-displacement-limit V8s that can easily top 140mph on the sandy single-lane unmapped tracks that pass for roads on the mysterious Mexican peninsula. The hugely popular Class 1 cars (more than 20 were entered in this year's race) are usually mid-engined single seaters with "A" arms so long the Mexicans call them "Arañas" (Spiders). They weigh in at about a third of what the Trophies do and many have power-to-weight ratios that match the big trucks. The Class 1s are far more nimble in the rocky passes that criss-cross the rugged, mountainous spine of Baja, so the comparative average speeds of the two types of cars are about the same, even though they make their time in different types of terrain.

What's really interesting about all this is that the most successful Class 1 racer is a vicious junkyard dog of a car called the Herbst "Truggie." Designed by Mike Smith of Huntington Beach, Calif., for the Nevada-based Herbst clan of desert racers, the famed land-shark-liveried "Truggie" is a converted Trophy Truck that fits the Class 1 rules but looks nothing like its competitors. Driver Tim Herbst won this year's points championship for Class 1 and has ruled the desert since Toyota folded its hugely successful desert racing program two years ago with perennial Baja winner Ivan "Iron Man" Stewart.

Although the fastest start first (separated by 30sec intervals) and are competing for the overall win, there are more than 20 other classes open to everything from "stock" SUVs to VW-engined dune buggies, bikes and ATVs. Most of these smaller classes are filled with experienced amateur racers who compete just as aggressively for their individual class championships as the mega-dollar teams do for the overall wins.

Recently an enterprising Baja champion named Todd Clements invented a new type of car he calls a "Baja Challenge" racer. Clements' "Challengers" are state-of-the-art desert-racing chassis that resemble the fastest Class 1 cars but are powered by Type 3 Porsche engines that provide incredible reliability. During most of the year Clements' "Wide Open Baja" organization runs "tours" down the Baja peninsula, often using the same roads SCORE uses for the Baja 500 and 1000 events.

With full support and chase crews to back up his "Challengers" on these four- to seven-day runs, Clements' "rent a racer" program has allowed many off-season pavement racers who've always dreamed "of running the Baja" to do just that. Many of those

who have run with the Wide Open Baja crew's tours during SCORE's off-season come back to race with Clements in the 1000 in November. For the past two 1000s Clements has run a six-car team of "Challengers" in their own separate class in the race, allowing racers of all types to run with the big dogs in one of the world's last great open-road races.

Think you missed those "good ol' days" of Nassau or the Tasman or perhaps the '30s and the Mille Miglia and Targa Florio, running on dirt with Nuvolari and Enzo's team of Alfas against the works Maseratis and Bugattis? It's all still there in Baja, amigo, only better. The cars are now more powerful, faster, fun to drive and more reliable. What's more you can rent a "works ride" in one of the best-prepared teams in racing. Just ask some of the escapees from this year's ALMS and Grand-Am series who sneaked off to Baja a couple of weeks ago to play in the sun.

Famed owner and team manager Kevin Doran, who came back after racing the Baja last year, is so stoked about the race he's talking about building his own Trophy Truck. Jeff Gamroth, who wrenches on the works-backed AJR Porsche ALMS team, had so much fun this year he's certain he could build his own-design, four-wheel-drive 911 desert racer that could win overall!

That's the mystique of Baja... there are no rules, and you can do anything you like! That kind of regulatory freedom is intoxicating to those who have been stifled by years of ever-increasing strangulatory rules in pavement racing. Any racer with any sense of competitive inventiveness is immediately hooked once they've had a chance to sample the Baja. Intrigued? Try www.wideopenbaja.com. A ride in one of Todd Clements' Baja Challenge racers will convince you there is more to life than pavement. — *Peter Brock*, Senior Editor, [RACER](#)

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