



# ABOUT THE Sport

EDITED BY ANDREW BORNHOP

SCORE

## THE BAJA 128

Sometimes you can't go home again

**BY ANDREW BORNHOP**  
BRUCE MEYERS NEEDS NO introduction to longtime R&T readers. An artist with the mind of an engineer, a surfer who plays a mean guitar and a decorated soldier with an invigorating curiosity, the 76-year-old Meyers is best known for building the fiberglass-bodied Meyers Manx dune buggy back in the 1960s. A Manx was *the* hip vehicle to have in SoCal, and the

connection to R&T was strong. Longtime Art Director Bill Motta owned one. So did former Editor Dean Batchelor and magazine artist Leo Bestgen. And when Bruce needed a name for his 2-seat buggy, former publisher Elaine Bond came up with Manx, thinking the scruffy nature of that tough cat perfectly fit the character of Bruce's buggy, which was based on a shortened VW floorpan.

This was proven back in 1967 when, aided by former Editor Jim Crow, Bruce and Ted Mangels drove Old Red, the first Manx, the length of Baja—from La Paz to Tijuana—in only 34 hours, breaking the motorcycle record by some 4 hours. The trip—fueled by sardines, saltine crackers, 65 gallons of gasoline strapped to the car and an amazing sense of adventure—helped Bruce get the publicity he sought for his fledgling company. Interest further piqued when Vic Wilson won the inaugural Mexican 1000 later that year in another Manx.

To bring us to current time, Bruce Meyers came back to

Baja last year with another creation, a 4-seat Manxter based on a full-length Beetle floorpan. As was the case 35 years earlier, Bruce hoped to use Baja to showcase this new buggy, by entering a race-prepped Manxter in the 2002 Baja 1000, which ran from Ensenada to La Paz. No record-breaking in the plans, just a solid effort at reaching La Paz, with me as one of the team drivers!

It all began well. The race Manxter, built primarily by Joe Lowery and

John Steinhilber—two members of the Meyers Manx club—was up to the task, its strong tube frame carrying long-travel suspension, a VW bus transaxle, beefy Porsche 930 halfshafts, power steering, a 1776-cc air-cooled VW flat-4 and a rollcage that accommodated my tall frame. What's more, we were put in our own Legends class, and Sal Fish of SCORE, the sanctioning organization, assigned us number 1967 to commemorate



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Bruce and Vic's early Baja accomplishments.

On race day—hours after locals delayed the start by flooding a part of the course—Bruce was the last car to take the green flag in Ensenada. Before long, though, he was catching slower cars and others with mechanical woes. According to his co-driver, Bruce showed his race smarts, at one point bypassing a log-jammed section of the course and passing many cars in the process. Another time he wisely avoided being lured into a booby trap by local kids who thought a crashed car would be funny.

Meanwhile, I waited for several hours at the BFGoodrich pit in Valle de Trinidad watching the Trophy Trucks going by at 100 mph. On the other end of the spectrum were the stock Class II VWs, still racing—and doing well—down in Baja.

Not as well as our Manxter, though, which arrived at 3 p.m., which meant that now we would have to drive well into the night... a concern I didn't need to have.

Here's why: After pulling out of the pits and

cruising down the highway to look for the turn-off onto the dirt race course, co-driver Joe Lowery and I began to notice that the Manxter was down on power. Then, still less than a mile from the pits—a plume of smoke erupted from the engine, spelling big trouble.

Turns out that oil was pumping out the crankcase breather tube and splashing onto the hot exhaust—compression was likely getting by a holed piston and pressurizing the crankcase—so we nursed the Manxter back to the BFG pit to consult with Bruce. He, unfortunately, had just left for a point farther south, driven by his buddy "Chicago Joe" in an original Meyers Manx. With Bruce unreachable, we began an unsuccessful search for a replacement engine via the poorly working radio in Valle de Trinidad.

Then a light went on in Joe's head: Let's pull the sparkplug on the bad cylinder, which would stop the crankcase from getting pressurized and allow us to drive on three cylinders on the highway to San Felipe, where the

chances of finding an engine in a buggy at Pete's Camp—a large beachfront campsite popular with tourists—would be pretty good. So off we headed on three cylinders, the engine sounding ratty but not pumping out any more oil as it propelled the Manxter to a speed of about 40 mph.

Not finding an acceptable engine donor in San Felipe, we headed south on the highway toward the next BFG pit in Puertecitos, enjoying the full moon over the Sea of Cortez while hoping the engine would last. It didn't. Near Puertecitos the engine coughed and died, perhaps because the oil had become too diluted with gasoline. A major disappointment, but before we could even assess just how stranded we were, a guardian angel arrived in an old Chevy pickup, offering us a tow back to San Felipe.

And thus began our wildest Baja adventure, a 45-mile trip on the end of a short towstrap attached to the bumper of a truck driven by a guy with local knowledge of a twisting road pockmarked with

chances of finding an engine in a buggy at Pete's Camp—a large beachfront campsite popular with tourists—would be pretty good. So off we headed on three cylinders, the engine sounding ratty but not pumping out any more oil as it propelled the Manxter to a speed of about 40 mph.

So needless to say, after radioing in that the Manxter was out of the race, we slept soundly on the beach at Pete's Camp—in motorhomes where the families of my teammates John and Joe were staying.

With no way for me to get farther south and meet up with Bruce and the gang in La Paz, Joe drove me up to Mexicali the next day in his Jeep, where I walked across the border into Calexico, telephoned for a ride and waited five hours for

my buddy Bert to rescue me. While waiting on a strip of grass outside a McDonald's, a bit rousty from it all, I eyed a bum ambling my way. I expected to be hit up, but he just nodded as he walked by; I guess he saw in me another guy down on his luck.

And you know what? I did feel that way. I went down to Baja, and never drove a Manxter on the dirt. That's racing, I guess. But my misery paled in comparison to that of Bruce and his wife Winnie, or that of Joe and John, and all the people who contributed to the effort. And to top it all off, crew member Chicago Joe flipped his truck and trailer on the way home and watched his original Manx burn to the ground on a Mexican dry lake.

Indeed, a huge disappointment for all involved, but I strongly suspect that the new 4-seat Manxter—in spite of its inauspicious Baja debut—will be a success. After all, some folks who saw it down in Baja have already placed orders.

■ Two significant Bruce Meyers creations: the original Manx known as Old Red (left) and the new Manxter, shown in street guise. The 4-seat Manxter is built on a full-length VW Beetle floorpan, and it's available as a kit from Meyers for \$7500. See [www.meyersmanx.com](http://www.meyersmanx.com) for more information.



■ After a good start and 128 miles of fun, engine troubles parked the Manxter, much to the dismay of Bruce Meyers, below.



PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR, PHOTO BY JAMES AND KAREN GILGADO