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Rough and rumble in mighty Baja

Mexico's unforgiving terrain attracts racers to gruelling 2,085-km race through the desert

LAWRENCE HACKING

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Nov 24, 2007

ENSENADA, MEXICO—This month I co-drove in the Baja 1000 off-road race in Mexico, the 40th anniversary of this spectacular desert challenge.

The course started in Ensenada in the north of the Baja Peninsula and struck out due south for 2,085 kilometres, or 1,296 miles, to Cabo San Lucas.

The Baja 1000 is notorious for being rugged and relentless, the terrain is without a doubt one of the most unforgiving on the planet.

Most entries have more than one team of drivers. I was slotted into the night shift in our team with my motorcycle-riding buddy Peter Weiss in a Protruck.

He and I go way back, having ridden off-road bikes elbow to elbow under the most arduous conditions for years. Teamwork is essential in any endeavour, and knowing your teammate is key. Peter and I know each other's capabilities better than our own.

The Protruck is a "specification" class, purpose-built vehicle developed by the legendary off-road race veteran Ivan "The Ironman" Stewart. Stewart probably has more off-road race wins than anyone else.

Our Protruck (number 253) has a 5.8-litre Ford engine that, in its modified state, develops 430 horsepower. The rules are very strict in Protruck. Each vehicle must conform to specifications mandated by the organizer: all sponsor brand name parts, such as 35-inch tires, shock absorbers and identical seats. Engine size must not exceed 360 cubic inches (5.9 L) and all teams must use the same gasoline.

Because Protruck rules level the playing field, the competition is close. The



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Protruck No. 253, co-piloted by Lawrence Hacking, ran around the clock in the Baja 1000.


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Baja 1000 by the numbers

First ran in 1967 as the Mexican 1000.

Number of entries (2007 rally): **424**

Official number of finishers: **239** (greatest number on record)

Finishing rate for 2007: **56.4%**

Lowest finishing rate ever (in 1978): **25.7%**

Overall 2007 winning time: **24:15:50** by a **Honda CRF450X motorcycle**

Rider of record: **Robby Bell**

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Rough and rumble in mighty Baja

Baja 1000 is an endurance race and patience is the key to success.

Our team had 18 members including three driver/co-driver combinations and six support vehicles. The fuel range in a Protruck is 160 km; the 151-litre tank is the same for each team. We calculated that we would use 2081 litres of race fuel. At \$8.95 (U.S.) per gallon, the fuel bill alone was significant.

This year 424 entries set out on 30-second intervals toward the finish – the Baja 1000 waits for no one. Typically, 50 per cent of participants don't finish.

Ken Losch, an Indy Pro Series team owner and driver, and his son, Sebastian, drove the first section. They left the start at 11:34 a.m. – 835 km later, they handed the truck over to us in the small fishing village of Bahia de Los Angeles, situated on the eastern side of the peninsula.

It was 3 a.m. on the hand-off. Ken and Seb were behind schedule, having struggled to extract the truck from a mud hole. But we were in fifth or sixth place at that point and they deserved a well-earned rest in the beds we just vacated.

Peter Weiss and I drove south in darkness, the truck's roof-mounted row of massive HID headlights shooting beams of light into the inky desert. Our plan was to run a conservative pace and hand the truck over to the next team in good shape for the final run into Cabo.

The Baja peninsula is mountainous; the roads are dusty and extremely hazardous. We were often snaking along narrow rocky roads with 30-metre drop-offs to the side.

On the flat desert floor, the road straightened out. Tall Saguaro cacti loomed above us as we hit speeds of 130 km/h. Because of the open cockpit, a chilling blast of wind hit our faces. Protrucks don't have windshields.

As the sun rose, spectator camps became visible. We were never far from local people watching along the racecourse.

In fact, sometimes the locals build "booby traps" that launch the vehicles in the air. The general rule is, if you see a large group of people, lift off the throttle until you're sure the coast is clear.

Halfway through our leg, we stopped at our pit area in San Ignacio for more fuel, new rear tires and an air filter change. Our crew worked quickly and got us on the road in a flash.

The course turned west toward the Pacific coast along a wide-open smooth gravel road. This is where we hit our top speed of 138 km/h, according to the GPS.

My job as co-driver was to stay glued to the GPS screen and let Peter know of any turns or dangers we were approaching on the course. Even though we had helmet intercoms, it wasn't long before my voice turned hoarse from shouting over the staccato bark of the exhaust.

Near a beach, we tore through some low dunes, onto a tidal plain and along a narrow road filled with metre-high sand whoop-dee-dooos.

A Protruck has about 60 cm of suspension travel front and rear. We used all the suspension we had as the truck soaked up the big bumps with aplomb.

Peter kept his foot on the gas pedal – the truck growled like a panther passing a kidney stone as the whoops passed under our wheels.

The last 160 km was the roughest our section had to offer.

There was one particularly steep and rocky climb, but we dispensed with it handily and were on our way into Race Mile 867 (1,395 kms), where the final driver change was to be made.

But on the way, a competitor bumped us from behind. It's customary in the Baja 1000, that if you want to pass someone, you respectfully bump them to let them know you want to pass. We respectfully let them go ahead and were rewarded with a

Fastest four-wheeled vehicle: **Mark Post's Trophy Truck**

Mark Post's time: **25:21:25**

Difference between first and second place including motorcycles and four-wheeled vehicles: **1:05:35**

Maximum speed of an average Trophy Truck: **225 km/h**

Number of competitors who attempted the 2,085-km course

solo: **27**

Number of solo competitors who reached the finish: **7**

Number of drivers wearing a Ricky Bobby Shake N Bake

driving suit, above: **1**

shower of rocks and dust, as the number 215 Protruck pulled away under full throttle.

We later took smug delight as we cruised by them parked beside the road with mechanical problems.

We handed our truck over to Rob Martensen and his father-in-law Steve Stroud for the last 689 km to the finish line.

Rob and Steve had three previous runs in the Baja 1000 and were our most experienced drivers.

They fought hard working their way into third place before a slight miscue found them stuck in a riverbed for more than two hours, only 45 km before the finish.

Steve and Rob had to pull the fibreglass rear fenders off the truck and shove them under the rear wheels to get some traction and get out.

After 36 hours, 22 minutes and 11 seconds of racing, the number 253 finally crossed the finish in sixth place. The Protruck was looking worse for wear but still in good shape. We shook hands and swore to make it to the podium next year.

Viva Baja!

TORONTO STAR