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RALLY/OFF ROAD

Baja 500 – Postcard From Baja

Ensenada, Mexico, June 5 — The 33rd annual SCORE/Tecate Baja 500



Mark McMillin and Brian Ewalt were the overall victors in the Baja 500 with their Ford-powered Class 1 Chenoweth buggy. (Photo: Trakside Photos)

had so many mid-race surprises that the final winning team wasn't certain of their victory until several minutes after the checker had fallen. Co-drivers Mark McMillin and Brian Ewalt sat on their Ford-powered Chenoweth on the finish line, watching the seconds tick off until there was no chance they'd lose. Since the cars are flagged off at 30sec intervals starting at 8:00 a.m., the elapsed times of others, who started later, could have theoretically changed the standings several minutes past the time when Ewalt crossed the finish line in Ensenada, Mexico.

The two El Cajon, Calif.-based veterans, who have raced together for 18 years, shared the overall and Class 1 victory after it became certain that no one could touch their 11h6min run to the flag. McMillin, who drove the first 280mi of the rugged 484mi circuit, was the overall winner in 1987, and had also won class titles in five other years. He was elated to put his Class 1, unlimited, single-seat, Chenoweth desert racer back in the No. 1 overall position after eight year's of dominance by the SCORE series' featured Trophy Trucks.

"Racing is a lot like life," he said, "very unpredictable."

McMillin was commenting on the final

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surprise of their race, just six miles from the finish, when Ewalt had come upon the Terrible Herbst Racing Ford Trophy Truck that had led most of the latter half of the race, going backwards! It had blown all the forward speeds in its transmission.

Undaunted, driver Ed Herbst had simply spun the big red beast around and was negotiating the final 6mi over the treacherous Ensenada grade in reverse when Ewalt blew by to take the lead! Herbst's brother Tim, driving Herbst Racing's other entry, the infamous shark-liveried, Class 1 "Truggie" had sped by as well, placing it second overall and second in class, just 1:15 behind McMillan.

First in the premier Trophy Truck class were Baja 2000 winners Dave Ashley and Dan Smith of Riverside, Calif. Their Duralast-sponsored Ford F150 had outlasted the faster entries of SCORE points leader Brian Collins and the multi-faceted Robby Gordon, who was driving a Ford-powered Trophy Truck of his own design.

Collins, who had started first and was scheduled to turn his big Chevy Silverado over to co-driver Larry Ragland, had built up a strong lead by the first checkpoint at Ojos Negros and was stretching it even more by the halfway point near Valle de Trinidad when he caught a tree stump with his right-front suspension, tearing off the whole lower "A" arm. Collins' untoward incident put his Chevy hard sideways in a tight canyon, bottling up the whole field. Gordon, who had been on a fast pace to overhaul Collins before Ojos, had faded early when a transmission cooling line came adrift. It had cost him several precious minutes and the loss of many places behind smaller, slower cars.

Now, thanks to Collins' logjam, Gordon and much of the field, including Ed Herbst, had caught up and the whole race re-started when the Chevrolet was finally dragged aside by a multitude of racers and fans. Herbst then took the lead closely followed by McMillin and Gordon, but the star pavement racer soon came across an inverted Class 1 car that had slid down a ravine and immediately recognized his dad, Bob Gordon, himself a two-time 500 winner! Robby parked his truck and then

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stopped four other competitors to hijack their tow-straps so he could make a long line to recover his dad's racer. It took well over an hour for Robby and his "volunteers" to put his dad back in the race, but what the hey... it's Baja!

By then McMillin's Chenoweth, Ashley in the Duralast Ford and Ed Herbst's big red Trophy Truck were long gone. Gordon then put the hammer down and, with long-time navigator Greg Tills reading the route notes, set some blistering point-to-point records that will probably stay in the books for a decade. But with a slim chance to win, it was all for the pure fun of lettin' it all hang out. Several thousand dusty, sun-baked race fans lined the roads and cheered his *brio* as he had the monstrous Menards Ford Trophy Truck fairly dancin' at over 130mph on many of the circuit's faster sections, which left the appreciative Mexican fans cheering hoarsely in his hazy, brown wake.

It's almost a separate event, but the Baja 500 bike race, which starts two hours earlier than the four-wheeled event (and has almost as many separate classes), is just as important a race to many in Baja as the main event. It's faster, too. The hottest, unlimited-class works teams start first, and with a clear trail and top pro riders, the bikes are able to set some amazing times. This year the Honda team again came with two four-stroke XR650Rs and cleaned house. Favorites Johnny Campbell and Tim Staab were defeated by their back-up team of Steve Hengeveld and Jonas Street, who averaged 48.77mph to set the weekend's fastest overall times.

SCORE Race Director Sal Fish modified the 500 course this year at the request of several of the drivers in the many smaller classes, who represent the majority of racers in the SCORE desert-racing series. Fish made the course more "technical," to put a premium on handling and suspension development in place of outright speed. The overall win by a non-works-backed Lightweight Single-Seater seemed to please many who felt that the course was more like the traditional races of the past. Be that as it may, several of the Trophy Trucks were faster for most of the day, but then that's what this newer "old-style"

course was supposed to prove, wasn't it?

There's never any official count of the number of spectators who attend the Baja races, simply because there's no way to count the tens of thousands who make the two decades-old events, the 500 and 1000, part of their annual vacation schedule. But this year, for some reason, the crowd seemed larger, younger and more knowledgeable. Perhaps it's Speedvision.

In addition to the thousands of gringos who stream across the border to camp in Baja's remote wilderness for a few days, just to watch the 240 vehicles race by their favorite "secret spots" (sometimes just feet from the course, in many places), there is a whole new element of wealthier, middle-class Mexicans who have discovered their country hosts one of the greatest automotive races in the world. They come in tricked-out SUVs and fully loaded 4WD pick-ups, just like their Northern yuppie brethren, and cheer the many Mexican racing teams that now form a larger portion of the starting grid than ever before.

It's a healthy sign for racing. SCORE and tourism in Baja proves just how important the SUV and truck market is to this special breed of racing fan. There really is a place you can go to enjoy the outdoors in your SUV, and watch some of the world's best racing at the same time. — *Peter Brock, Senior Editor, [RACER](#) (Photo: Trackside Photo)*

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