

SPECIAL

2-STROKE ISSUE: NEW, OLD & RESTORED

CCC
02977

DIRT BIKE

RACING UPSETS:
EnduroCross, Supercross,
24 Hours of Glen Helen

BAJA RALLY:
Dakar Comes To
North America

JANUARY
2015



2007 KTM 200XC-W



2015
BETA
300RR



2015
HUSQVARNA
TE300



2015
YAMAHA
YZ250

6-BIKE 450 SHOOTOUT!



Att'n retailer: Please
display until Jan. 22

\$4.99



01>

0 71486 02977 9

**HONDA
HUSQVARNA - KAWASAKI
KTM - SUZUKI - YAMAHA**

THE BAJA RALLY

Story and photos by Ian Reid

Patrick Reyes beginning his 500K day with a cool ocean breeze.

In the days leading up to the 2014 Baja Rally, the organization was in a quandary. How would the course be after Baja's most intense hurricane in modern history? What would happen if Hurricane Odile hit northern Baja? The

organization sent support teams out for recon, rerouted the course and recalculated the road books. "Are we a go?" is all I asked. On the other end of the line, I got back, "We're a go."

In other parts of the world, racers and teams had been prepping for months for the only pro-level rally race in North America. Bikes were shipped, and trucks were in route. Everyone was glued to the satellite images the week leading up to the event, watching green bands fly across the Lower Peninsula as Hurricane Odile destroyed hamlets from Cabo San Lucas to halfway up the 1000-mile peninsula of Baja California.

The organizers were ready with race radios from the famous Radioman's team. They had satellite and on-bike medical teams that would be strategically placed on the

course. The crews from Baja pits were poised for mid-race fuel dumps. Everything had been accounted for. Racing fans could even follow the race online as each rider wore two Spot locator beacons. And, Raven's Jim McKoy was bringing the heli. This race had it all.

International rally racing in Baja is fairly new, but motorcycle racing runs deep here in the heart of this romantic country. The Baja Rally had no closed roads on its route, and the director of tourism for Mexico gave the event his stamp of approval. Pilots went from looking at terrain to looking at the road book every few seconds for what seemed to be eternity as the days' odometer ticked off. They raced and navigated through unknown country. In a rally, it's not just who can pin it that determines who wins; it's he who finds his way the quickest. To complicate things, there is no GPS use allowed other than a waypoint on a screen for an emergency route. There are no course arrows, no flagmen, and no guarantees that something big isn't just around the corner. Attention to detail and focus are a constant drain on energy. The consequences are high, but the rewards can be higher. This is racing in the Old West. If you make it to the top of the podium, you've earned your turns.

The favorites going into the Baja Rally were many, including some returning from the inaugural event, like 2013 Baja Rally champion Andy Grider, third-place winner Chilly White and top-t10 finisher Michael Johnson. SCORE veteran Steve Hengeveld threw his hat in, as did Carlos Gracida from Mexico, and a newcomer to the Baja Rally, 2013 USA ISDE team member Scott Bright of Colorado.

Stage 1 began northeast of the host Hotel San Nicolas

Rally Management's Scott Bright pinning it in the transition from dunes to desert.



and the port town of Ensenada, where the land begins to roll its way into the interior and finish outside of the farming community of Ojos Negros. The terrain is complicated. The stage had no added value to Baja veterans, as this was a special stage through private ranch lands deep in the interior that most Baja racers will never get to ride outside of competition. It was the prologue that set the tone for the rest of the week.

Stage 1 would see Chilly White come in second on time just behind Grider. Both would be penalized for a speeding infraction in a controlled zone on the course at the end of the day. Grider received a 15-minute penalty, and Chilly paid dearly with a 30-minute penalty. The penalties would send White plummeting out of the top 10 for the next day's start, meaning he would have to exert more effort to attain clean air. Andy Grider, who led and navigated most of the race, dropped from first down to fourth once the penalties were assessed. The top three were Hengeveldm, Rojas and Bright. A couple of amateurs, Jirsa and Glynn, were infiltrating the pros' coveted top-five places. In anticipation of the next day's race, a 500-kilometer stage to Coco's Corner, pilots hit the sack as the moon rose across the Baja sky. The constant buzz of power tools throughout the night air sent those trying to sleep scrambling for earplugs.

Riders left the host Hotel Horse Power Ranch and rode the liaison to the start in Ojos Negros, out of the valley and toward San Felipe. Stages 2 and 3 would see White climb eight spots, getting him back in the race with top contenders Hengeveld and Bright. It was clear that Chilly was back in the game! Racing is not always full of magic stories, though, and returning champion Andy Grider was the first casualty of the race with a seized motor on the liaison to Stage 3. Two other riders would go out with mechanicals that day also. As I rolled up to Grider on the 100-degree tarmac just north of Gonzaga Bay, I saw the disappointment in his eyes. Tools out, his race was over. The top three were now in a battle separated by less than three minutes. To put that into perspective, only a third of the

Chilly White, one of this year's top pilots, just before the dunes on day four. Chilly was a contender from the first gun.



Just outside of Coco's Corner, Patrick Reyes enjoying the wide-open washboard.



Passing lobster pots and surf breaks, Chilly White on the final stage heading north to Ensenada.

Charles Jirsa racing the sun from the Sea of Cortez on his way to the Pacific.

THE BAJA RALLY

way through this race (800 miles), the difference between the top time of Hengeveld 1:35:59 and the tail gunner at 1:40:14 was only a few minutes. This was anybody's race.

Day three began with Coco waiving the official start flag out of Coco's Corner. Steve Hengeveld from the Monkey Business racing team would be the rabbit. Hengeveld had clean air, but he was also the first to hit the navigation challenges. Hengeveld looked comfortable at speed in sections where you would expect the throttle to roll back and the brake to be feathered, but he ran into difficulty with a bad line choice that led him to swamp his bike in a salt marsh near the coast. He struggled to get his bike out, but his efforts were futile. He was going to need help.

Help soon arrived in the form of Bright, Bowman and White, who banded together and pulled his motor from

the water. They tried to start it, but the machine had taken a drink. Hengeveld was in trouble; his hopes for a strong finish quickly faded. If he could not get the bike going, extraction would be long into the night. White and the others helped him out of the water, and with the assistance of Bowman and Bright, Hengeveld got the Honda rolling again, but it took a solid hour. They were all off the back. Many other racers had passed the situation on another line. They were all in catch-up mode.

One of the customary rules in Rally Raid is that if you stop to assist a rider in need, the time lost will be taken off your overall time in honor of your good sportsmanship. At the end of the day, those who assisted until the motor was running were credited the elapsed time; however, there was a new leader board headed by Gerardo Rojas, Mike



Steve Hengeveld playing catch-up on day three after his motor took a drink.



Top-ranked amateur Charles Jirsa giving some of the pros a run for their money in 2014. Jirsa was the top-finishing amateur in this year's event.

THE BAJA RALLY



Guadalajara's Carlos Gracida finishing up a long day two and heading into Coco's for some paella.

Johnson and Phil Bowman of the Rally Management team. This race was going to come down to the wire.

When the Baja Rally needed help with the course around El Rosario for the Mama Espinosa's stage, they called on Oscar Hales' knowledge and expertise. Oscar helped set the first loop of the day, which would take them out to the Pacific and back to a stage finish in El Rosario. After a short liaison north, they hit the beach for Stage 6 and the dunes along the coast before turning into the foothills of Baja's countryside. It was fast and navigationally challenging. The final stage was along the coast, and riders had to navigate past some of Baja's famous surf breaks for three solid stages, all on the final day. Competition was still intense among the top five, and pilots were counting minutes on the road. Rules state you have to ride the liaison to the finish in order to complete the race, but the drama was not over for Steve Hengeveld, as his machine kept

Steve Hengeveld on day three, leaving a trail of dust for others to follow. On his way to the Pacific and Momma Espinosa's in El Rosario.



cutting out on him. He would have a good pace and be passing riders; then all of a sudden, nothing. He couldn't do anything but watch them go by again. If the bike quit on the way in to Ensenada, his hopes for a podium finish were over. He received assistance, including a bump-start from Chilly White, and I personally passed him twice on the way to the locations. Each time, he shook his head in disbelief. All that hard work, and the minutes were ticking away. In the end, Henge and the Monkey Business Honda made it to the finish line with lots of cheers and laughter.

Scott Bright, the pit bull from Colorado, had come out on top, with Carlos Gracida from Mexico in second. Surprisingly, even with all Steve Hengeveld's mechanical problems, he got that overall podium finish that he and the Monkey Business team deserved. Congrats to all who came to taste a little of Baja's finest.

The Baja Rally was a success. The organizers overcame huge hurdles, plotted an 800-mile race across northern Baja, and everyone was home with their families after the event. Racers were given the opportunity to pin it in northern Baja's sickest terrain. Races like this are gifts. It's like the first days of SCORE and the Baja 1000. You hear all the old-timers saying, "Back in the day—" and "You should have been here when—" I'm excited for this style of racing in North America. Whether you're a bench racer or a professional pilot, you can enjoy the fruits of Baja at this great race. Contact the Baja Rally and tell them you want to come see magic south of the border. It will be the adventure of a lifetime. One day, you might see it in the lower 48. Who knows? Put it on your calendar. Let's ride motorcycles and share some killer fish tacos and cold cervezas. See you in 2015 at Baja Rally 3.0. □

Andy Grider, fastest man after day one, would be out with a mechanical by the end of day two.

