



## **Baja 500 on a motorcycle?**

**From the eyes of Mark Levrett**

This adventure starts in January of this year 2010. A good friend, Ryan Sei was at my house repairing my home entertainment system, he suggested that I install a DVD to test the system. The first DVD to enter my sight was one that I have viewed probably more times than any movie in my recent memory...."Dust to Glory" if you know anything about off-road racing, you are definitely familiar with this exciting movie. While sitting on the couch, the movie starts to play, my adrenalin starts to churn, the wheels start turning in my head.....The love that I have for off-road racing.....Baja and the whole experience, "hmmm". Not a word was muttered, my wife looked at me and said, "your going to race the 500 aren't you"? In total disbelief of her statement, and my adrenalin skyrocketing at this point.....without even processing my thoughts, I said, " yaaaaa"! As I witnessed the look of fear on her face, and recalling that I have raced this grueling race numerous times, only in the past I was in a class 1 race car, with a roll cage and seat belts wrapped around me. This race could and should be compared to the Super Bowl, or the Indianapolis 500, or the Daytona 500, only difference..... this is my world! Welcome!

Well.... now I have a new goal to add to my already overloaded schedule. So my first step was to spread the word that I needed a team, "any interested participants"? My first prospect was a long time friend Mark Hildobran, Mark has been asking me for years to join him in a motorcycle race, which I have declined numerous times, not wanting to risk getting hurt. Many years ago, I was what you might consider a hot prospect on a motorcycle, Mark and I shared the limelight together many times. So what an awesome pairing. Not to my surprise, Mark was very excited when I called him, I thought.....yessss, only one more person and we are on our way. Mark in turn suggests his brother Scott, I was all for this, thinking wow, this was easy! next step was to set a meeting to discuss a plans.

We met the first time at a local sports bar In Reno to discuss plans for our experience. Upon meeting, I felt one of my first obligations was to express the negative aspects of this grueling race, since I have had the pleasure of acquiring excessive Baja experience, that was my focus, blow no smoke. We would be in a foreign country, that according to the media has a horrible track record. So I started talking and talking, telling of experiences that I have gained, bad and good. As I spoke, and looked around at my friends and there wife's, the eyes were getting bigger and bigger. My thought was, is it fear?...excitement? If you know anything about Baja and its mystique, you may

comprehend the facial expression I was presented with, it was no surprise. That night we parted ways and my thoughts were, ok were all on the same page now, that's great!

A couple weeks past, and with no real rush on the horizon, we schedule another meeting, just to touch bases. At this meeting, to my astonishment, there was a whole different picture. Rumor had spread, we had twenty people all wanting to participate! "O my goodness", I was now presented with a completely different challenge, how to accommodate all these people? Lets see, we now have eight people that want to be in the race, and the rest just want to help with pit support etc...No problem I thought, we will just have two teams of four riders, wow! that was an easy fix. So again, I start talking of my experiences, and again I see large eyes! I thought to myself, these people are so excited for this experience. We all leave the place with a goal of contacting each other throughout the week. Again, I pat myself on the back and think this is going so easy!

In the weeks to follow I would be presented with more unexpected and different challenges, very few of the excited twenty would return my phone calls. What happened, Is my dream falling apart again? Finally I did start getting some return calls, excuse after excuse as to why a large portion of the twenty people would or could not commit. I knew that the real reason was the plain old fear of Baja, and the challenges it presents. During this time I was presented with another huge blow, my slam dunk team was no more....done! Mark was to be laid from work, from a position he had possessed for twenty years. "Wow"!.... I had forgot about another thing, that old economy issue that we all currently face!

I started to loose hope.....on the whole thing, until I was contacted by another old friend, Rich Barker, a very fast rider with the gift of stamina that the energizer bunny would be jealous of. Around this time I started talking with another of my closest friends, Curt Michitsch. My thought about Curt was this, Curt does not have lightning speed, but I knew if I told Curt this is where we need the bike to end up, come hell or high water, the bike would be there. Curt was reluctant to commit, due to the fact that he has not run a motorcycle desert race since 1982. He begged to only be a part of the pit crew. I told Curt that pitting was not an option, he must race....period, that is it! We have that type of friendship, since he is one of my best friends. Curt being the dedicated friend that he is said, "OK"..... Now there is three!

The three of us spread the word that we need a fourth rider, for what seems like eternity. There were many people that were ready to sign on the dotted line. Same thing though, I would not hear from them, or the crazy excuses would surface. I finally had an idea, Rich is good friends with a guy by the name of Mike Forte. I used to know Mike very well, but a divorce from his sister way back in the 1980's put a little damper on our friendship. I thought Mike loves to ride, he's a really fun guy to hang out with, and I know he would be up for the adventure. What the heck, maybe it would help to mend old wounds. I suggested to Rich to contact him, he did, Mike was ecstatic, and as I suspected all of the above took place, the wounds are healed. Thank goodness!.....its on.

Once again we have a team, now we can begin to prepare! We disassembled the bike down to the frame, no nut or bolt was left untouched. At this time thankfully, Bill Kunz of TorchMate came on

as our main sponsor. We were able to use there CNC plasma machines to build needed items, this was a huge time saver and it saved us on excessive parts costs. We made skid plates, radiator guards, bike stands, disk guards etc.... The bike was ready.



Ronnie from Boost created the awesome one off TorchMate graphics.

The day finally came that we were to leave for our adventure. Every one of us shared in the same excitement, we couldn't get out of town fast enough. We finally arrived in Ensenada on Sunday afternoon. With no plans to start pre-running until Monday morning, so we explored the town and did some shopping.

Early Monday morning at 5:00 A.M., and after driving a couple hours across the Baja Peninsula, we began our pre-run. I suggested we ride in groups, not wanting anyone to be by themselves, so that is what we did. I rode with Curt on the east coast, and Mike and Rich on the west. Curt and my goal was to pre-run my 95 mile section, as well as Curt's 105 miles all in one day, the following day do it all again, while the same plan was set for Mike and Rich. OK.....so that was a huge mistake, way too much to tackle in one day. Curt and I finished my section easily, then we began his section. Little did we know, we were in for a big surprise, as a five mile section called the "Summit" had been completely brutalized by winter storms. We got through that rocky mess, then dropped down to the San Felipe side, only now the temperature was in the low 100's \*note\* "it snowed and froze in Reno the day we left". It was like I opened the oven door while my mother was baking! So, I waited for Curt, then we would proceed on. To top off our surprise day, around mile 120 I got a flat front tire. A flat rear tire is tough to ride on, but a front is pure misery, and I still had 30 miles to go! At this point Curt and I had become split up. I found out later that he had taken a wrong turn a ways back and became lost for a period. So I rode on thinking that he would catch me due to the slow speed that I was moving. This was pure misery in the middle of the desert, and to top it off I had heat stroke, I couldn't cool down, and I had worn blisters the size of quarters in my palms from trying to hang onto the bike. Great! How am I going to race with blisters?

I finally arrived at the pit where we were to meet our buddy Jeff Rocke, he was not there, "was this the spot, do I need to go further in this scorching heat, please....no"? I was so hot, I am sure I had heat stroke, the only shade was a truck all by itself in the middle of a dry lake, in the middle of the Baja desert. Curt never did catch up to me as I suspected, and I would not see him for many hours.

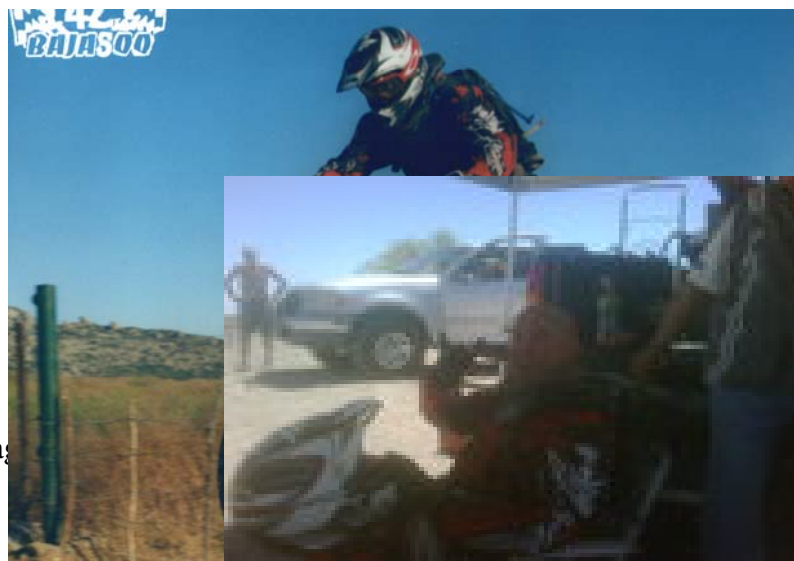
Fear had now set in, "where was Jeff....where is Curt"? So I waited.....and waited, finally after about 45 minutes, and much to my relief, Jeff arrived, I was so happy to see him. Fortunately during this period another motorcycle also stopped, passing a message to us that Curt was safe, but out of gas about 20 miles back. When he became lost he had used up the extra fuel recourses needed to get to our meeting place. We loaded up the truck and back tracked on the race course for a long, hot, slow trek, at what I consider a turtles pace. We finally got to a point where we knew we were close to Curt, the guy that passed us gave us a race mile, so we knew we were close. Jeff says, "hey, throw one of these M-100's out the window (very large fire cracker)..... so I did, booom! We go another couple hundred yards and we throw another, booom! again. Only we could see Curt in the distance running for cover, not recognizing the truck we were driving, he was expecting to see his truck. We finally arrived at Curt, he was scared to death, he thought just as Jeff planned that he was being shot at by drug cartel. We laughed for quite a while.....Jeff and I that is, we loaded up and headed back to Ensenada. Mike and Rich had an uneventful pre-run, only fatigue got the best of Mike, so he did his section and opting out of doing Rich's section.

I chose not to ride the next day of pre-running due to the blisters on my hands. My thoughts were to let them dry out during the next couple days leading up to the race, this proved to be a great decision, as I never had a problem on race day. We were all done pre-running as of Wednesday evening. The first 40 miles is closed to pre-running until Thursday, so Rich and I completed this section and we were done. Friday was contingency (tech inspection), this is a huge occasion in the Baja community, all the downtown streets are closed to through traffic, and in turn filled with fans and spectators for a wild Baja party.



Friday evening after contingency we loaded all the chase vehicles with spare parts, fuel and food. We had a team meeting as to discuss the game plan as well as the obligations of each of us. Following the meeting the only thing left to do was to rest, we were to be at the trucks at 5:00 a.m. Finally to do what we had planned and prepared for for six months. We were so excited and ready!

On Race day, at 6:30 a.m. I left the starting line on my journey to race mile 95. At our first stop at mile 40 we fueled with no problems. I proceeded on feeling really good, around mile 50 I encountered a problem with my front brake....I had none! I was able to make adjustments to my riding style to make up for the situation, it hampered my speed



considerably. I pitted again at mile 70, much to my surprise we did not have the correct parts at this pit for the repair, again I took fuel and headed for mile 95. About midway through my next section I had what I call, brain fade, I forgot that I had no front brake. I went into a turn way too fast and could not slow down to a comfortable cornering speed, I blew through the turn and right through a tree. I was tossed over the handle bars and to the ground hard. While laying on the ground gasping for air, I had knocked the wind out of myself, I wondered, "why am I doing this"? "I don't want to be hurt"! With out a second thought and my adrenaline skyrocketing, I jumped up and away I went to my destination. I made the pit and pulled in for repairs and a rider change. After about 20 minutes Curt was on his way to mile 205.

Joe, Mike and I loaded up the truck and proceeded to mile 205. After about a hour and a half drive and a military check point, we were finally there. I was again to get on the bike to ride the next 25 miles of solid whooped out section (rolling bumps about Two to three feet deep). We arrive, park and get out....."o my goodness", was it hot, again 104 degrees. We set up pit and shade, then we waited.... and waited..... and waited, finally coming to the conclusion that Curt must have broken down. He was way over due according to what we had calculated as to the time he should arrive. After numerous attempts to reach some sort of info on the race radio channels, we heard nothing. At this time the whole thought process changes, the fear of...is he hurt, is he just broke down. What could have I missed, or left loose while getting the bike ready for this race? A short while later, not even paying attention to passing riders, I see a bike about to pass by our pit, I scream "Curt". He was about to pass us do to it being so busy at the pits. Later I found out that he was delirious...again from heat stroke. Once again, now we must all change our focus back to race mode.

So now I am back on the bike again, pounding and pounding over the whoops, wondering if it will ever end. Just survive the course, the rough terrain and get the bike safely to Mike was my focus. At around mile 230 I see Mike and Jeff, I pull in, Mike gets on and proceeds to the west coast without a hiccup to hand off to Rich. Jeff and I will now make our last strategic move to about race mile 400, where I will once again suit up in case Rich is worn out, hurt etc....

Rich gets on and heads on his way. We put Rich in this section for a couple reasons. First of which is he would ride the longest non stop section of any of us. Remember the Energizer Bunny thing.....plus he is ten years younger than any of us. Second there is a lot of 100 mph plus sections, Rich loves that thrill. So Rich heads on to the finish, stopping for his scheduled pits, with no problems. He gets to Jeff and I at race mile 400, a location that had turned into an outdoor party by this time, I am ready to take over if need be.....he was good, and now on his way to the finish!

We pack up again, and head to Ensenada, to the finish! We get back just in time to see Rich cross the finish line. At this time feeling of excitement along with relief comes over me. We had done it, we had finished a race and concord the Baja mystique! It still gives me chills as I sit here writing this story. We did it, and in a very respectful 7th place!



Rich Barker at the finish of the 2010 Baja 500. Mark Levrett and Curt Michistch in the background.

A very special thank you to all that enjoyed this adventure with me, Curt Michitsch, Rich Barker, Mike Forte, Joe Todaro, Mike Todaro, Jeff Rocke, Dick Barker, "T", Pepe, Johanna, Gabby and JD.

Thank you to all the people behind the scenes that made it possible for us to accomplish this feat. My wife Michelle, my girls, my father John, Bill Kunz of TorchMate, my sister Cari, Ronnie Parker of Boost and Paul of Reno Motor Sports.