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THE ADVENTURE OF THE BAJA 500

TORCHMATE RACING TAKES PODIUM FINISH IN THE BAJA!

I am used to sitting behind the wheel. Holding on to it helps your body absorb harsh bumps and it gives you a general sense that you control your fate. This was my third race as navigator in the Torchmate Ranger and up to this race, I have always felt comfortable. The adventure of Baja racing is more extreme though and I once again felt the hair raising thrill that I have spent years attempting to numb.

The race started in a very relaxed manner. As a team we had spent hundreds of hours preparing. The paperwork alone was an inch thick. It was time for the fun to begin and we were all jubilant as we crossed the border. While no one can deny the violence in Mexico, but we felt relaxed as we drove 100 miles down the coast to our hotel in Ensenada. Off-road racing has deep roots in Mexico that were clearly visible as soon as we reached town. Decades of team stickers littered restaurant windows and taco carts. We packed the vehicles into a secure lot and headed inside our hotel for some Tecate.

Torchmate Racing recruited the finest and most colorful group for this epic race. The team consisted of nine on the ground in Mexico and a few back home helping with logistics. Bill Kunz and I would start the race. Experienced desert racer Mark Levrett was talked into riding with Greg Jones for the second leg while JT Taylor (rock racer and Speed Technologies crew chief) captained Chase #1. Mike Shaffer and Lance Clifford (no explanation needed) made up Chase #2 on the Pacific coast. Nick Socha and Ross Carr joined us for the trip and we even recruited a few experienced locals in Ensenada.

I have been told that pre-running is more fun than the race itself. The people spreading those lies have \$500,000 pre-runners with dangly cup holders and air conditioned seats. We had a Jeep TJ and Ford F-150. While anything off-road is fun, 200 miles in a stock truck gives you some sore spots and a quick appreciation for the technology behind desert trucks. Bill and I crossed Sierra Grande in the F-150 and headed south to Borrego. The 100 mile jaunt took us well over 10 hours and ravaged the stock truck. More than once I was forced to spot Bill over the rocky summit before we reached the scorching sands of Laguna Salada (the name is very misleading). From there it was 40 miles of whoops, silt, and rock before we reached the highway. 18 hours after we departed, we wearily returned to the hotel for some rest.

Race day was approaching. It ended up being my chore to attend the driver's meeting which was full of Mexican pageantry. I noted that promoter Sal Fish described the race as "the E-ticket ride of your life." I recalled the fantastic things I saw riding in the 2006 Baja 1000 and wondered how year after year this man got away with a race that is so death defying. Only in Mexico.

After all the planning was over, equipment sorted, and team staged, we finally arrived at the start line. Bill and I built our confidence and shook hands. The moments of relaxation were over and the deafening pitch of the 500 hp V-6 took hold. Soon we made the turn into the famed Ensenada ditch and soared over the manmade jump. Thousands of Mexicans were barely visible flashes of color as we thundered on. I recall reading 96 mph as we again entered the city streets of Ensenada. At least there was no dust. It was

35 miles to the first highway crossing and this zone is notorious for dust, wrecks, and booby traps. We eventually found all of them but were both intently focused on our duties. We passed two trucks in our class which put us in second place. With no mechanical problems, we radioed the chase crew and rocketed south past mile 35. The county road heading south of Ojos Negros has huge rolling jumps and we nailed them all. My stomach was in my throat as the Torchmate Ranger fell off the leeward side of the rises.

We pushed on into rougher terrain and maintained over 65 mph on narrow winding two track roads. Fences, cattle guards, and even horses on the course flashed by as we gained on other trucks. The dust was absolutely blinding and the only thing preventing us from a wreck was the GPS. Sooner or later Bill saw the lights of the vehicle in front and could follow them, always gaining. A quick hit of the siren and we were past. Another highway crossing at race mile 76 with no need for service. Soon we would turn east and face the 100 miles of Sierra Grande with no chase support.

We had a brief stop for fuel at BFGoordirch Pit #1 and pushed on. About 7 miles later my GPS turned off. I looked for the problem but had no luck. Next, the gauges read no oil pressure and we pulled to the side. The radio and satellite phone would not function. Mexicans streamed up to the truck, eager to help. I directed them the alternator and reached for my cell phone. With all the technology in the truck, the cell phone saved the day. I reached JT who could reach the course only a few miles ahead. Our problem was a damaged belt which was quickly repaired and the after a jump start from our Mexican friends, we were on our way once more.

Final repairs were quickly made but most of class 7 had past us. We tore up Sierra Grande and the ride did not even compare to a stock vehicle. What previously took us hours, only took minutes. We raced down the barren range and hit 107 mph on the rough lakebed. The truck quickly gobbled up 40 miles of whoops and we turned it over to Greg and Mark at mile 199. I was dizzy and unstable and could barely stand when I exited but the ride was safely over and we were now part of the chase effort. Lucky for me I missed most of the horrific events unfolding outside the truck as I was glued to the GPS. Bill kept us safe, kept us fast, and did a fantastic job that was unquestionably our best effort yet.

As soon as we were refreshed, we caught up with JT near race mile 255 and waited to hear from the race truck. Patience turned way to nervousness and JT called BFG relay but there was no word from #703. Over an hour past before the phone rang and Greg informed us that a banked turn had caused a full roll and nearly destroyed the truck. They were stuck and working to repair the steering. Another hour past until the badly bruised truck creaked to a halt in our pit. The whole crew got busy and bent the truck back into shape. The disappointment could be felt but we still had hope for a finish. What was left of the lights pierced into the night sky and the truck was gone again.

We retreated to a hill near race mile 390 to again await the truck and add enough fuel for the finish. Some slept while others nervously fidgeted. Eventually we saw clouds illuminated by skyward facing lights and knew that Mike and Lance had gotten the team successfully up the coast. A quick fueling and we were off to the finish line.

As the truck turned the corner only yards from the finish, we all felt pride in pushing through the hardest adversity on the course for a hard fought finish. We celebrated and Sal Fish came to shake our hands. He informed us that we had finished 3rd in class 7. What a race! After all our problems we still beat 8 trucks to the finish. Our best race yet and something to be proud of.

The team now has two trucks in need of serious repair. #232 is completely torn down and will be reassembled to join #28 Bill Kunz and #199 Jesse Haines at We-Rock #3, in downtown Reno. Roger will race his AMSOIL / Torchmate Ranger under #232 at the Colorado Springs XRRA on the same weekend (June 20 – 21). The massive Torchmate Racing effort pushes on!

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