

Return to Baja

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Malcolm Smith crossed the 2004 Baja 1000 finish line in La Paz around 3:30AM as the class winner. It was exactly 20 hours, 14 minutes and four seconds after his teammate Jack Johnson left the starting line 1,016 miles away in Ensenada.

It was nearly exactly 51 years after Malcolm Smith had made his first trip to Baja with his parents.

It was nearly exactly 50 years after he had first screwed used football cleats into his Lambretta scooter tires to make knobbies to ride in the San Bernardino National Forest.

It was nearly exactly 47 years after he returned to Baja with some friends. They drove his 1954 pickup to Angels Beach, where they camped for \$1 a night and spent from dawn to dark cutting donuts in the sand with his 1953 Matchless. A motorcycle that he was too small to kick-start alone.

It was nearly exactly 46 years after he had first tasted victory in a hare scrambles race on the same Matchless.

And it was nearly exactly 37 years to the day, following a month of reading himself to sleep every night memorizing the only English language guidebook he could find on Baja, after he notched his first class win, along with the overall victory, in his first Baja 1000. In that race he and his teammate J.N. Roberts finished seven hours ahead of the next vehicle, a Meyers Manx VW driven by Vic Wilson and Ted Mangels.

Smith added six class wins and four more overall wins in his next 28 years of racing the fabled course.

That amount of racing, combined with countless weeks spent exploring the roads, trails and trackless back-country of the peninsula have yielded an almost supernatural knowledge of Baja.

Smith, while discussing the race course with fellow teammate Jack Johnson and ex-Honda factory Baja team rider Jimmy Sones, spoke in veteran Baja racers' shorthand. "Just after that nasty wash," Johnson began the sentence, "there's that steep uphill left hander," Sones filled in the next phrase, "where you have to avoid that big sharp rock in the left side track," Smith finished the sentence. All nodded in solemn agreement. All three knew the exact location of a specific rock in a race course over 1,000 miles long.

You don't build that kind of knowledge without accumulating a library of racing records. The Class 50 (motorcycle riders over 50 years of age) "Dream Team" of Malcolm Smith, 63, Jack Johnson, 52, and Chris Haines, 53, now have 29 class wins between them. Haines, with 11, Johnson, with 10 and four overalls and Smith with eight and five overalls, represent perhaps the most formidable reservoir of Baja victories and aggregate Baja racing knowledge ever assembled on a single team.

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Haines, in an interview during the race, preached the wisdom of knowing your position in your class. "I've seen so many young guys who have been leading their class, only to crash trying to pass other racers ahead of them, throwing away their class win in the process." When asked how long it took him to learn this lesson he replied with a grin, "Lots of leads and lots of crashes."

Johnson was running in the top ten overall during his first segment when he was slowed by two flats. Before he had to slow for the tire trouble he had passed nearly all the competitors who had started earlier, including dozens of younger riders in their 40s, 30s and 20s. After completing the second segment of his over 600 mile effort he commented, "It's just like watching a movie of the pre-run unwind in my head. I see it all before me, it passes by, and then it's gone."

While driving to the pit location where he would mount the team's Honda XR650R, Smith had commented on his change in perspective towards racing. "I used to look for the fastest line. Now I look for the line where I'm least likely to get hurt." When asked how it felt to not be as quick as he used to be, he commented "My reaction time, eyesight, strength and courage are not as good as they used to be. I just had to keep reminding myself of my age, and it took a while for it to sink in."

It had taken some prodding and a little bit of old-time motorcycle motivation to overcome these new realities and convince him to join the team. Both Haines and Johnson had called twice in unsuccessful attempts to recruit Smith to the team. After being rebuffed on pure racing temptation, Haines finally appealed to Smith's legendary Scottish thrift. It took an offer of a new Honda XR650R pre-run bike, which Smith could keep after the race, to seal the deal.

Even after weeks spent pre-running sections he already knew like the back of his hand, as he waited at Honda pit six to mount the race bike, Smith still had doubts. He later related his thoughts as, "What's an old man like me doing out here? Once I'd gotten on the bike and ridden a few turns I said to myself, "Oh yeah, now I remember."

In the more than 50 years Smith has been in and around Baja, much has changed. On the way home from his first win in 1967, Smith ended up riding three days on top of a load of live sea turtles to get back to Ensenada after his van broke down at Bay of Los Angeles.

However, even with all the changes both Smith and Baja have seen in those 50 years, one thing has remained constant. As he said goodnight to his teammates after their historic victory, Smith said, "It's a lot more fun when you win!"

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