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5TH ANNUAL BAJA RALLY,
PRESENTED BY RALLY COMP

RALLY RACING IN BAJA

Third time's a charm for Poucher ● By Mark Kariya

> As the popularity of European-born rally raid continues to gain momentum, with the Dakar Rally the pinnacle of the sport despite not being part of the FIM Cross-Country Rallies World Championship, there's a noticeable void in such events on American soil. That's likely due to the fact that American dirt bike enthusiasts generally don't know how this whole rally thing works, and even fewer are willing to learn it and modify a machine to play the game. Then there's that whole land-access dilemma.

But, just south of the border in Baja California, Mexico, the opportunity to run races on both public and private lands is far greater, and the peninsula's population is much more receptive to off-road racing due to the mega dollars it pumps into the economy and the excitement of being able to watch some of the world's best desert racers fly past on routes they may use daily.



While adventure bikes are modeled after the rally bikes of a previous generation, they're not the first choice as race bikes—unless you're like Wes Van Neiuwenhuis. He's only raced a few times, each one an endurance-type event like Washington's infamous 24 Hours of Starvation Ridge, where he stunned many on their "regular" dirt bikes. Despite only one day of navigation practice, he easily won the Adventure Bike class.



BAJA RALLY

Thus, Baja makes a splendid venue for a rally, especially since the impact on the terrain is far less than the typical desert race due to no pre-running by competitors. Only the promoter who lays out the course knows the exact route; racers have to find it by way of GPS-marked waypoints, compass headings called “caps” and road books, which are like oversized enduro roll charts with pictograms for directions.

The fifth annual Baja Rally presented by Rally Comp attracted a relatively small but diverse field of hopefuls. Some had previous rally experience, of course, and saw this as a perfect “practice” race for bigger and better things—Dakar being the ultimate goal. Others harbored no illusions of going to Dakar, except in a spectator capacity, and simply wanted to see if they were up to the challenge of rally navigation. Then there were a few for whom this was their first race!

While a few showed up to the start/finish at Ensenada’s San Nicolas Hotel with proper rally bikes, most simply modified their existing off-road mounts with a rally tower to house the requisite navigation components and, in some cases, an extra-large fuel tank. Two entered the Adventure Bike class on big KTM twins and finished every kilometer respectably. (The route avoided any huge sand dunes over the course of its five days, though it did direct riders through smaller ones near several beaches along the Pacific coastline.)

The race came down to navigating skills, as it often does in rallies. You can lose a lot of time by missing a waypoint or choosing the wrong trail when coming to a split with three or more options.

Thus, Mike Johnson—a regular in SCORE races (so he’s very familiar with Baja) and the head honcho at sponsor Rally Comp—used his experience to his advantage, leading the early going. Garrett Poucher—also a SCORE regular—floundered and picked up huge penalties, possibly due to focusing too heavily on speed.

“The first day [that ingrained race pace] actually cost me about 30 minutes in penalties, unfortunately, and that really put a lot of pressure on me for the rest of the rally, not only frustration-wise, but it put a lot of time between me and [leader Johnson],” Poucher shared.

The solution proved remarkably simple: “Basically, what I did was mark my road book differently so that I would



After helping to put on previous Baja Rallies, Alfonso “Poncho” Alonzo raced this one and proved adept at navigating, as well as riding to win the Rally 1 Rookie class and finish fourth bike overall.

recognize certain parts of the road book that I needed to capture. You have to go through certain waypoints [and] that was part of the problem with me on the first day. I missed a waypoint and I was 10 kilometers away before I realized I missed a waypoint, so I had to skip it and it cost me 20 minutes.”

That and emphasizing the start of speed zones (penalties there can add 10 minutes to one’s time) helped him avoid further penalties. His navigation skills also improved, and he began to gain time on Johnson, finally taking the lead on the third stage.

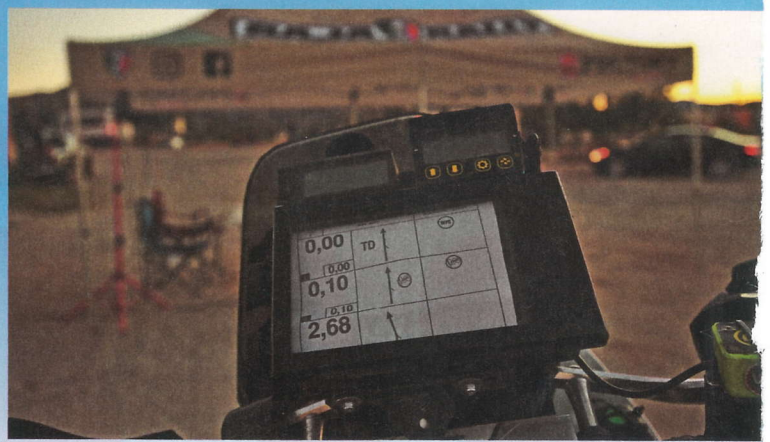
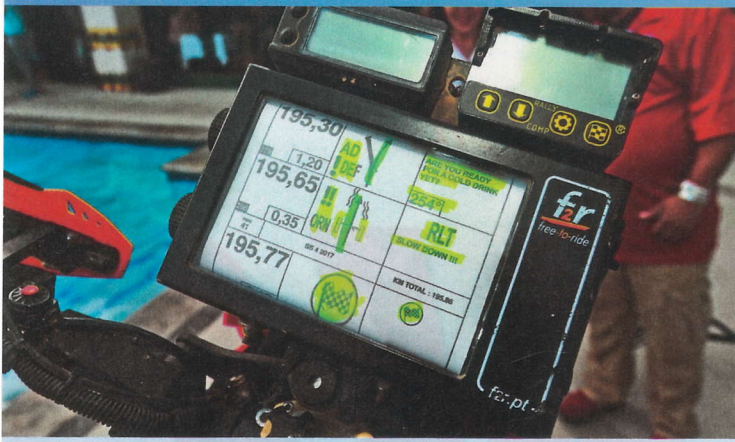
Poucher continued, “Fortunately, I changed up the way that I marked my road book, paid a little bit more atten-



Probably the most experienced racer in the field, Steve Hengeveld destroyed the competition on the final day, enabling him to take the overall for the third year in a row—but this time in his first time at the wheel of a UTV!



Much of the course kept the Pacific Ocean in sight. Here, Rally 1 winner Devon Mahon concentrates on an upcoming waypoint where he’ll make a turn.



The road book, the bible of the sport. Decipher its messages and it will guide you through each twist and turn to the promised finish.

tion, slowed down a little bit where I needed to, marked where I needed to slow down and marked where I knew I could pick up some speed and go fast.

"I knew I could get these guys in the rough stuff, so I tried to keep that to my advantage and push as hard as I could through the rough stuff. But, on the navigation stuff, really just slow down and take my time, make sure that I made my turns.

"I still made some mistakes; I crashed the second day in a hole. I crashed the third day in a hidden hazard and ended up breaking my helmet and scratching up my arm pretty good.

"When you crash, it takes a lot of energy out of you. Then you have to get your mind back in it, because the

frustration starts to set in and you start worrying that the people behind you are catching up.

"That's the whole SCORE mentality. The whole desert racer mentality kicks in and you start pushing hard again. You really have to turn that back down and start to take your time so you don't continue to make mistakes. It was difficult, to say the least."

Difficult, but not impossible. After a great third stage, Poucher held on in the fourth stage (despite more than 20 minutes of penalties) to seal the victory in only his third rally, while Johnson settled for second almost seven minutes behind.

"My big goal is to compete in the

2019 Dakar," Poucher declared. "My focus for 2018 will be to spend more time training, going to [additional] rally events, spending more time running rally road books and taking courses from guys like Jimmy Lewis, trying to get that repetition part where it just becomes second nature, and continue on my endurance and conditioning to get used to something like Dakar, [which] is going to be 14 days.

"And, I'll use SCORE and desert racing to work on my speed overall and rally to work on the mental part of it."

Contrast that with Wes Van Neiuwenhuis, the Adventure Bike-class winner. Incredibly, he's raced only a few times, each of those previous events on his KTM 950—and not in rallies! Instead, he's employed it

BAJA RALLY



The early leader, Mike "Big" Johnson, found himself unable to stay with Poucher as the week rolled on. He settled for second in Rally Pro, less than seven minutes adrift.

strictly in long-distance races where you wouldn't expect to find a big adventure bike, like the infamous 24 Hours of Starvation Ridge in Washington. In fact, he's never even raced a regular dirt bike before!

"A lot of people laugh at us when we pull up with these big bikes. Then they see us running faster lap times than them and competing with the top teams and placing very well," he revealed.

But this was his first go at rallies, and he said, "It's been a blast this whole week. This is my first navigation race of any kind, and I only spent one day, really, studying navigation before coming down here. I had some flash cards I was studying on the way down, but really only one day of actual riding with navigation, so pretty unprepared coming down here in that sense, but I was hoping my riding capabilities would make up for that."

Obviously they did, as he easily won the class and beat a number of others on their dedicated dirt bikes.

And therein lies, perhaps, one of the major reasons a race like the Baja Rally is so appealing—though small in size, it provides an avenue for lots of fun, regardless of how rad your race bike is or how much experience you have. Figuring out rally navigation is at least as important as riding skill and speed. □

Despite DNFs in his previous two rallies, Garrett Poucher knew how to fix what went wrong. He applied that to the latest Baja Rally and ended up winning. Now, his sights are set on Dakar 2019.



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